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## **Abstract**

### **Searching for belonging: an exploration of how recent university graduates seek and find belonging in new church communities**

**By Matthew Alan James Ward**

Young graduates are a group who have much to offer to the life of the church, but there are many who do not make a transition from belonging to a church while students to belonging after graduation. This thesis explores the experiences of recent graduates as they seek out new church communities. In doing so it seeks to build a greater understanding of the challenges they face, the processes by which they search for and find belonging in new church communities, and why some do not succeed in finding a church to which they feel they can belong.

It offers a survey of literature relating to church leaving and, taking an interdisciplinary approach drawing upon material related to theories of social capital and consumer culture, as well as theological perspectives, examines a range of understandings of belonging.

Using a qualitative longitudinal research method it explores the experience of recent graduates. Building on analysis of the data generated, it develops a model that illustrates the process by which those graduates searched for, and moved towards, belonging to new church communities. This model is illustrated through biographies of belonging, formulated for each of the participants.

The thesis offers theological reflection upon three themes that emerge from the data analysis. First, it explores the relationship between consumer approaches to belonging and faith. Secondly, it examines what it means to receive an invitation to contribute to the life of the church community. Thirdly, it reflects upon what it means to dwell with God.

Finally, the thesis draws upon its findings in offering suggestions for the transformation of practice among three groups of people: university chaplains and others who work with Christian students; churches that receive new graduates; and students who are preparing to leave university.

# **Searching for belonging: an exploration of how recent university graduates seek and find belonging in new church communities**

A thesis submitted for the degree of  
Doctor of Theology and Ministry  
in Durham University  
Department of Theology and Religion

By  
Matthew Alan James Ward

2016

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## **Statement of copyright**

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# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Setting the Scene

Every June thousands of students leave university. They are eager and expectant as they move out into the world of work having completed their degrees. These leavers represent an enormous pool of talent and many will become leaders in their chosen fields. Many of them have been active members of churches while they were at university. Their experience of church is often of a place that has helped shape them and which has supported and encouraged them in both their faith and their life in general. As well as finding church to be a place to receive support and encouragement, for many it is also somewhere they can be actively involved in the life of the community by engaging in activities such as music groups, youth groups or environmental and campaigning activity. Some even serve as members of church councils. This positive engagement with church means that as new graduates move to new locations they are often keen to find new churches to belong to. These young people are a group who have much to offer to the life of the church, but anecdotally there are many who do not make a transition to belonging in a new church.

Having worked as a chaplain in three universities over the past 15 years I have talked with many former students who were very involved in church while at university but, a number of years later, are no longer actively part of church. These conversations suggest this is not because of a loss of faith or a falling out with the church. Instead, lifestyle pressures and a crisis of choice have often made it difficult for them to be part of the church's life. This is of real concern when seen against a background of declining church attendance in general and within the 'millennials' generation in particular who make up only 11% of those

who regularly attend church and represent the group whose attendance is most rapidly declining.<sup>1 2</sup>

To combat this, some student organisations offer support to those who are moving beyond university life. For example the University and Colleges Christian Fellowship (UCCF, the body that most University Christian Unions are part of) offers two resource books for students approaching the end of their time at University.<sup>3 4</sup> Fusion, an organisation that actively seeks to help link students with local churches at the point that they start at university (as well as offering training to Church based student workers), also offers a resource book.<sup>5</sup> These resources include case studies and quotes from recent graduates which illustrate some of the issues that are faced in the transition to life beyond university.

I became a Christian at university and thrived with a great support network. I stayed in the same church, but found the transition a real shock. I was no longer a member of [Christian Union] or church student group, but a worker at church. I didn't quite know where I fitted in. There

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<sup>1</sup> Jacinta Ashworth and Ian Farthing, 'Churchgoing in the UK: A Research Report from Tearfund on Church Attendance in the UK', (Teddington: Tearfund, 2007), p.9.

<sup>2</sup> Peter William Brierley, *Pulling out of the Nosedive: A Contemporary Picture of Churchgoing; What the 2005 English Church Census Reveals*, (Christian Research, 2006), p.116.

<sup>3</sup> Abi Gallagher, *Transition: Essential Information for Graduates*, (Oxford: UCCF: The Christian Unions, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> Krish Kandiah, *Final: Bite-Sized Inspiration for Final-Year Students*, (Nottingham: IVP, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> Liz Clark and others, *The Graduate Alphabet: An A-Z for Life after University*, (Loughborough: Fusion UK, 2013).

weren't the same deep friendships because people had moved away and those around had less time.<sup>6</sup>

I found it quite hard letting go of my status as a 'student' in church. There was no longer a dedicated ministry for me and I had to be much more active seeking help and support when I needed it.<sup>7</sup>

These comments hint at the range of issues which can be faced by recent graduates as they make the transition away from student life. There is a sense of loss of identity which is heightened by finding that there is no longer a group specifically designed for them. For many, especially those who have grown up in a church community, this is likely to be a new and unsettling experience. There are changes in friendships because of geographical separation as people relocate. There is also a transition to being at work and the expectations that come with that, not least in the amount of leisure time that is available. All this presents significant challenges for those making the move beyond student life.

## **1.2 Study aims and research questions**

The process by which these young people find new church communities to belong to is little understood. Although research clearly shows that there is a decline in attendance for this age group it provides little insight into why this is the case. There is also a gap in research literature that explores how graduates make transitions to belonging in new churches. This limited understanding means that there is little support available to those attempting to find new churches to belong to in their life beyond university.

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<sup>6</sup> Gallagher, p.25.

<sup>7</sup> Clark and others, p.23.

In undertaking this research my aim is to explore the experiences of recent graduates as they search for new church communities to belong to in order to build a greater understanding of the challenges they face, the processes by which they search for and find belonging in new church communities and why some do not find places of belonging.

My overarching research question is “How do recent graduates find belonging in new church communities?”. My secondary research questions (which help to unpack this overarching question) are: “What approaches do recent graduates take to finding new churches?”; “How do they move towards belonging?”; “What makes the difference between attending and belonging?”.

Gaining an understanding of the experience of new graduates potentially offers insights that may inform my work and that of other chaplains, of churches that students belong to while at university, and of churches that receive new graduates in the months after they have left university. It may also be helpful to those who are about to make that transition for themselves.

### **1.3 A model of practical theology**

This research is situated within the field of practical theology. Ward defines practical theology as ‘the spiritual discipline whereby those in the Church reflect critically on their contemporary forms of expression and practice.’<sup>8</sup> As this definition suggests, practical theology is primarily a reflective process. It has also come to imply a methodology that begins with human action and ‘follows some form of hermeneutic circle with a claim to make connections between the

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<sup>8</sup> Pete Ward, *Participation and Mediation: A Practical Theology for the Liquid Church*, (London: SCM Press, 2007), p.165.

world of human action and the Christian tradition that result in transformative practice.’<sup>9</sup>

The model of practical theological reflection developed by Swinton and Mowat provides a helpful framework with which to approach my research.<sup>10</sup> The framework is based on the concept of what they term ‘critical faithfulness’.<sup>11</sup> This recognises the importance of acknowledging ‘the divine givenness of scripture and the genuine working of the Holy Spirit in the interpretation of what is given’ and offers an approach that takes seriously the experience of individuals and communities situated within a particular tradition. They also underline the importance of exploring that experience in a way that ‘[takes] seriously the interpretative dimensions of the process of understanding revelation and ensuring the faithful practices of individuals and communities.’<sup>12</sup> This critical approach allows tradition to be taken seriously and at the same time encourages critical engagement with the experience of individuals and communities using tools offered by qualitative research approaches.

The model for theological reflection that Swinton and Mowat describe comprises four stages: the situation; cultural/contextual analysis; theological reflection; formulating revised forms of practice. My research follows that pattern.

The initial stage, ‘the situation’, explores the context of church leaving and belonging for graduates. In this stage I made an initial formulation of my

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<sup>9</sup> Neil Darragh, 'The Practice of Practical Theology: Key Decisions and Abiding Hazards in Doing Practical Theology', *Australian eJournal of Theology*, (2007).

<sup>10</sup> John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, (London: SCM Press, 2006), p.73ff.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p.91.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p.93.

research questions, and conducted a literature review to gain insights from already existing material.

The second stage, 'cultural/contextual analysis', brings the first stage into dialogue with resources offered by other disciplines within the social sciences to explore the situation and deepen the understanding of it. To do so I conducted empirical research to examine the experience of those leaving university as they sought new church communities to belong to and analysed that empirical data using a variety of lenses.

The third stage engages with what is discovered through the exploration of the situation and the cultural/contextual analysis and asks reflective questions about those findings from a theological perspective. Whilst theology is not absent from the earlier stages, the third stage allowed me space for more careful and deliberate exploration of the theological significance of the data that I worked with previously.<sup>13</sup>

The final stage of my research, following Swinton and Mowat's approach, attempts to draw together the cultural/contextual analysis and the theological reflection and bring the insights gained to the original situation. In doing so I offer fresh perspectives for practice.

## **1.4 Overview of the thesis**

Having outlined my research aims and questions and my overall approach in practical theological terms, I will now give a brief overview of the remainder of the thesis.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p.96.



To ensure that the work is thoroughly grounded in existing material related to church leaving and belonging, in Chapter 2 I offer a literature survey exploring such material. Looking first at material related to church leaving, I argue that although there is a significant body of literature which explores this, it is primarily focused upon those who leave because of disillusionment with the church or because of loss of faith. I then examine a range of understandings of belonging, taking an interdisciplinary approach which draws upon material related to theories of social capital and consumer culture as well as theological perspectives.

My third chapter presents a thorough description of the development of the research method exploring first the research philosophy and methodological stance that I adopt and outlining my sampling strategy. I then present a detailed description of my data collection tools and discuss the ethical issues raised by their use. The chapter concludes with a description of how I conducted my analysis of the data obtained.

Having described the process of designing and conducting the fieldwork and analysing the data generated within it, in Chapter 4 I present the results of this work. I first describe the experiences of the participants as they seek new churches to belong to. I then present a model that illustrates how participants moved towards belonging. In chapter 5 I present narratives for each of my participants which overlays their experience onto the model.

In chapter 6 I explore in depth the key themes that emerged from the results presented in the previous two chapters. I do this using three lenses (consumer cultural, social capital and theological) which offer alternative perspectives on belonging.

In chapter 7 I offer a theological reflection on three of the key aspects of the process which participants used to move towards belonging in new church communities. Those aspects are: the use of consumer approaches to find a

church; the invitation to participation that forms the watershed between attending and belonging; and being 'at home' in a church community.

In my final chapter I explore opportunities for revised forms of practice and make some suggestions that may be helpful to chaplains, church leaders and those about to graduate which are designed to support and encourage the process of finding a new church to belong to.

## **2 Literature review**

Dave did well. He graduated with a 2:1 in geography and secured a job as part of a graduate training scheme in Nottingham. While at University he had been actively involved in a church and his faith was really important to him. On moving to a new city he tried to find a new church to belong to. It was a struggle.

Dave is a fictional character based upon students I have known over years of university chaplaincy ministry. Looking at Dave's experience offers a way of thinking about the issues and situations encountered by many leaving university. In this chapter I will explore these issues by considering a range of literature and in so doing to sketch the landscape in which my field research will take place.

### **2.1 Church going in context**

Dave's experience of attending and belonging to church does not take place in a vacuum, but instead is set within a world which appears to be increasingly secular. It seems sensible to begin, therefore, by examining this context, within which both my research and that reviewed in this chapter is situated.

There has, over many years, been considerable discussion concerning the changing place of religion in public and private life. The variously nuanced theories of secularization suggest that there has been an erosion of the place of religion in Western society. Steve Bruce offers a detailed analysis of the influences and outcomes of secularization, and his mapping out of the interconnected paths of religious, industrial and cultural reformations presents

the complexity of the various forces that have been at play.<sup>14</sup> Theories of secularization are concerned with the changing hegemonic place of religion, meaning that the understanding and definition of religion is crucial to this. To that end Bruce offers a substantive definition of religion as:

Beliefs, actions and institutions predicated on the existence of entities with powers of agency (that is, gods) or impersonal powers or processes possessed of moral purpose (the Hindu notion of karma, for example), which can set the conditions of, or intervene in, human affairs.<sup>15</sup>

This definition is very broad in its scope. At times this leads to the development of an argument that lacks some of the nuance that is necessary around the discussion of personal faith as opposed to institutional religion. It is important to recognise that even though, as Bruce argues, secularization decreases the importance of religion in society the importance of it for those who 'have religion' (such as Dave) remains significant. Those people still place significant emphasis on their own spiritual life and its integration into their everyday existence. However, their practice of religion is conducted against a backdrop that has little time for, or sees no need of, religion.

The shift to religion retaining personal importance for some individuals, as opposed to the whole of society, comes alongside its diminished place in community. At the same time there is a change in the importance of community for everyday life with an emphasis placed upon wider society as the locus for people's lives at the expense of local community. Although religion, or rather in the British context Christianity, still enjoys cultural significance, where it fits is increasingly complex. Society and culture are transformed in a context that is both more secular and at the same time more pluralistic than ever before. This

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<sup>14</sup> Steve Bruce, *God Is Dead: Secularization in the West*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), p.4.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p.2.

unravels, argue Guest and Olson, in a decline of association with church at a local level.<sup>16</sup>

In many ways the reasons for increased secularization are not of great importance to my research. As Martin helpfully points out, there is not simply one story of secularization but a range of different interpretations of a collection of widely observed changes.<sup>17</sup> What is relevant, however, is its outcome. Secularization has resulted in an environment in which religious faith is seen as a matter of personal conscience. Alongside this there is a decline in association with religious or faith groups with these no longer being seen as integral to social life or personal faith. This combination of factors means that the environment in which Dave is seeking new churches to belong to is at best ambivalent towards religious belonging.

## 2.2 Leaving

Throughout his time at university Dave had attended and been actively involved in a large student church near campus. Leaving that church was hard for Dave, but to the congregation he was just another student who was finishing at university. His leaving was hardly acknowledged.

Church leaving in the UK is a significant issue and a significant concern for the Church. Grace Davie, in her seminal work 'Religion in Britain since 1945', offers a comprehensive overview of the religious landscape of the UK in the late

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<sup>16</sup> Mathew Guest, Elizabeth Olson, and John Wolffe, 'Christianity: Loss of Monopoly', in *Religion and Change in Modern Britain*, ed. by Linda Woodhead and Rebecca Catto (London: Routledge, 2012), pp. 57-78.

<sup>17</sup> David Martin, *On Secularization: Towards a Revised General Theory*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005).

twentieth century.<sup>18</sup> Her work develops two major themes, the first of which is of relevance to my study. Working from a sociological framework Davie describes a mismatch between indices of religious belief in the UK, which are consistently high, and the statistics for religious practice and membership that show consistent decline. Her analysis develops the now widely used idea of 'believing not belonging'. To use her words 'It appears that more and more people within British society want to believe but do not want to involve themselves in religious practice'.<sup>19</sup> Davie's work is undoubtedly significant and has led to much work in both the Church and the academy exploring the issues further. However, the phenomena which is described by her work is not entirely relevant to my study. Dave's commitment to the church he attended whilst a student is what Guest, in his exploration of the nature of Christian faith in English universities, categorises as active affirmer.<sup>20</sup> My intention is to explore the experience of those who could similarly be described as active affirmers and who are leaving because of positive life change events. If we are to understand how people find a new church to belong to we nonetheless need to begin by understanding people's experiences of leaving, since this may have a profound impact upon their journey to belonging in a new place.

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<sup>18</sup> Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain since 1945: Believing without Belonging*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994).

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p.107.

<sup>20</sup> Guest et al offer a typology of Christian students comprising of 5 categories; active affirmer, lapsed engagers, established occasionals, emerging nominals, unchurched Christians. Active affirmers represent those who are consistently frequent church attenders. They 'maintain enthusiasm for involvement in Church both at home and during term time'. Mathew Guest and others, *Christianity and the University Experience: Understanding Student Faith*, (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), p.41.

### 2.2.1 Experiences of leaving

There are a number of studies that have explored the experience of church leavers. One of the major studies was that conducted by Richter and Francis who surveyed and interviewed church leavers about their experiences and reasons for leaving.<sup>21 22</sup> They found that the specific reason that someone leaves a church can be extremely nuanced but nonetheless identified a broad range of categories. These can be summed up as: disillusionment; changed/incompatible lifestyle; theological problems; stylistic problems. It is worth describing these categories in a little more detail. Richter and Francis identified disillusionment as being brought about by such things as pastoral neglect, the lack of relevance of church activity to the rest of people's lives, or the apparent hypocrisy of the church.<sup>23</sup> Changed/incompatible life-styles, they suggest, stemmed from individuals developing a growing sense of self-awareness that in turn led to clashes of values and a questioning of the church's moral teaching often around issues such as sexual ethics.<sup>24</sup> The changed/incompatible lifestyle category could lead to thinking that those who cited theological problems as reasons for leaving did so because the church was seen as offering too conservative a perspective. That was only part of the story with others saying that the church had become too liberal.<sup>25</sup> Stylistic problems were often connected with the way that worship was led or liturgy

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<sup>21</sup> Leslie Francis and Philip Richter, *Gone for Good? Church Leaving and Returning in the 21st Century*, (Peterborough: Epworth, 2007).

<sup>22</sup> Philip Richter and Leslie Francis, *Gone but Not Forgotten: Church Leaving and Returning*, (London: DLT, 1998).

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, p.120.

<sup>24</sup> Francis and Richter, p.153ff.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, p.277ff.

used, but spilt over to include things such as the level at which teaching was pitched.<sup>26</sup>

Alan Jamieson's research, which was conducted in New Zealand, considered those who had left Evangelical, Pentecostal and Charismatic churches and were still continuing with a journey of faith but had made a choice to do so outside of a church structure.<sup>27 28</sup> He describes this as moving beyond 'churchianity'. The qualitative interviews that he conducted with church leavers and leaders of the churches they had left examine in detail the reasons why people have ceased to belong to churches, which Jamieson uses to create a model or map of church leaving. This identifies two major reasons for leaving: disillusionment with the church as an organisation (this is normally at a congregational level); and crisis of faith.<sup>29</sup> He categorises the latter as falling into a number of sub-sections that he identifies as reflective exiles, transitional explorers and integrated wayfarers. Amongst his participants there were none who had simply left due to a change in location and/or lifestyle.

Richter and Francis' and Jamieson's categories highlight a difference between those who leave for negative reasons (disillusionment, theological or stylistic problems) and those who leave as a consequence of other things that are happening in their lives (changed lifestyle). In considering those who are at the transition point of leaving university it is studies that examine the experiences of

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid, p.251ff.

<sup>27</sup> Alan Jamieson, *A Churchless Faith: Faith Journeys Beyond the Churches*, (London: SPCK, 2002).

<sup>28</sup> Alan Jamieson, *Journeying in Faith: In and Beyond the Tough Places*, (London: SPCK, 2004).

<sup>29</sup> Jamieson (2004).



those who are leaving because of a change in lifestyle that are of most interest. This area, however, appears to be little researched.

My literature searches revealed that there is only one study that pays attention to those who leave church communities because of changed life situations. That work, conducted by Kallimer and Peck, is based upon a series of seminars they conducted with church leaders who were concerned about people leaving their churches.<sup>30</sup> Their initial analysis is very similar to that of Jamieson and Richter and Francis and they also identify five broad reasons for people leaving church: personal reasons; faith issues; congregational reasons; leadership issues; conflict issues. In many ways these represent a finer grained view of Jamieson's two reasons for leaving with their latter four equating to Jamieson's disillusionment category. Their category of 'personal reasons' is the closest to any analysis of those leaving because of life change situations. Here they identify factors in people's leaving as: change of location; church building move; work pressures; family issues; and general lifestyle issues. Although they do pay attention to people who leave due to changed circumstances, their work is based only on the concerns and experiences of church leaders. As such, this study sheds relatively little light on the direct experiences of those who were leaving.

Guest, Olson and Wolffe's analysis of church membership figures, which consistently show decline (even twenty years after Davie's analysis), and the wider cultural landscape within which that decline is situated leads them to suggest that:

Indications are that people who ceased to attend church did so not as a result of any conscious rejection of Christianity, but more from a sense of boredom, gradual drift away from a habit of regular involvement, or a

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<sup>30</sup> Ron Kallimer and Andy Peck, *Closing the Backdoor of the Church: Preventing Loss from the Local Church and the Whole Church*, (Farnham: CWR, 2009).

sense that their lifestyle was no longer consistent with perceived Christian standards.<sup>31</sup>

The lack of research about people's experiences of leaving due to changed circumstances or lifestyle is surprising, especially when the National Census of 2001 shows that around 11% of the population changes address each year.<sup>32</sup> This represents a significant gap in research that may offer important understandings for those concerned about decline in church attendance.

### **2.2.2 Theories of leaving**

Although the literature on experiences of leaving church is likely to have relatively little to say about Dave's experience, nonetheless its authors offer a number of theoretical frameworks with which to understand and explain leaving in its broadest sense.

Richter and Francis offer a range of theories as a means of understanding the process of leaving. The first of these is role theory.<sup>33</sup> This sociological theory suggests that people adopt roles (e.g. wife, mother, employee) and with each role that is adopted there are a range of culturally constructed expectations. These expectations in turn lead to a range of behaviours or praxis. The adoption of these roles is the choice of the individual and is shaped by their degree of conformity to social norms. There is the possibility for the individual to either act the role or to fully identify with it. Equally there is the choice for an individual to refuse the role or to cease to behave in the way that the role expects. Richter and Francis suggest that 'church goer' is an adoptive role.<sup>34</sup> It

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<sup>31</sup> Guest, Olson, and Wolffe, p.83.

<sup>32</sup> Tony Champion, 'Population Movement within the UK', in *Focus on People and Migration*, ed. by Office for National Statistics (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 91-113.

<sup>33</sup> Richter and Francis.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, p.15.

is thus possible to simply stop identifying with the role or to cease to act it out. However, this model lacks sophistication. There are no clear markers as to what the role of 'church goer' may look like. Furthermore the adoption of the category 'church goer' also opens the possibility of belonging without believing. In other words being a 'church goer' is not about faith it is simply about social belonging. Such a suggestion goes entirely against the theories of secularization and the decline of association discussed above. It also represents the exact opposite of the construction that Jamieson explored and is well documented by others – the believing not belonging group.<sup>35 36 37 38</sup>

Richter and Francis also suggest that for some leaving church is part of a process of de-conversion, arguing that if conversion can be understood as a process then that process can also happen in a different direction, that is, moving away from a position of faith and belonging.<sup>39</sup> Their explanation draws upon Skonovd who suggested that de-conversion could be understood as a sequence of crises of belief consisting of review and reflection, disaffection, withdrawal, transition, and relocation.<sup>40</sup> This theory places a heavy emphasis on the cultural aspect of conversion, seeing it is as much a conversion of behaviour

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<sup>35</sup> David M. Hay, *Religious Experience Today: Studying the Facts*, (London: Mowbray, 1990).

<sup>36</sup> Abby Day, *Believing in Belonging: Belief and Social Identity in the Modern World*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>37</sup> Davie.

<sup>38</sup> David Voas and Alasdair Crockett, 'Religion in Britain: Neither Believing nor Belonging', *Sociology*, 39 (2005).

<sup>39</sup> Richter and Francis.

<sup>40</sup> L. Skonovd, 'Becoming Apostate: A Model of Religious Defection', in *Pacific Sociological Association annual meeting*, (Anaheim, California, 1979).

and society as it is of faith.<sup>41</sup> It also sees faith as being bound with practice within a faith or church community, and, possibly erroneously, equates loss of community with loss of faith. This again is refuted in the work of Jamieson and others.<sup>42 43</sup> The theory also assumes that conversion is a process. This both ignores the possibility of a “Damascus road experience” for individuals and potentially leads to seeing conversion as being a linear route or path.

Notwithstanding these criticisms, Richter and Francis’ theory of de-conversion has little relevance to Dave and those in similar changing life situations. Indeed, the circumstances leading to Dave’s leaving (success in his studies and securing employment) could even serve to strengthen his faith, since they may be interpreted as evidence of God’s providence.

The other work of note that explores leaving is Ward and Wild’s ‘Guard the Chaos’.<sup>44</sup> In this they offer an analysis of major life change events drawing heavily upon their own experiences of leaving religious communities. Their work is focused upon change that is precipitated by a crisis event, and as such it has little relevance to my research. However, their exploration of the concept of liminality provides a potential avenue for exploration and is considered in section 2.3 below.

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<sup>41</sup> This is demonstrated by the approach of the Alpha Course that gradually introduces those who attend to a culture of church at the same time as introducing them to Christian thought.

<sup>42</sup> Jamieson (2002).

<sup>43</sup> Voas and Crockett.

<sup>44</sup> Hannah Ward and Jennifer Wild, *Guard the Chaos: Finding Meaning in Change*, (London: DLT, 1995), p.16.

Jamieson's work draws upon Ebaugh's theory of leaving, which covers four stages: first doubts; seeking and weighing alternatives; negotiating turning points; and developing a new sense of identity.<sup>45</sup> Some of these broadly defined stages are potentially helpful in understanding Dave's experience. The first doubts stage, for instance is 'essentially one of re-interpreting and redefining a situation that was previously taken for granted'.<sup>46</sup> This stage may have some relevance in exploring those who have left church because of life change events. Dave has moved from much that was familiar. He is now trying to make sense of a new location, new work place and new friendships. He may, as a result, experience a series of doubts about where his faith and church belonging fits with that. As Ebaugh's theory is one that offers a process it is entirely possible that the latter stages could be applied to Dave's situation. However, the theory is developed out of study of those who moved from being nuns to become, as Ebaugh puts it 'an Ex'. It is a theory that is concerned with leaving a role as much as it is with leaving a place or community. Those interviewed within Ebaugh's study had been members of religious communities who had reached a position of very deliberately questioning their sense of vocation and belonging and the role of 'nun' constructed around that. Dave does not do this. He becomes a leaver of a community because he finishes something else. His role as 'student' clearly ends but not through any questioning of his situation.

Jamieson also draws upon the developmental understanding of faith offered in James Fowler's well known 'stages of faith development'.<sup>47 48</sup> He suggests that,

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<sup>45</sup> Helen R. F. Ebaugh, *Becoming an Ex: The Process of Role Exit*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

<sup>46</sup> Jamieson, (2004), p.29.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, p.120.

<sup>48</sup> James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*, (New York: Harper Collins, 1981).

at each stage of Fowler's model, change occurs for the individual in 7 different areas: the way people think; their ability to see another's point of view; the way they arrive at moral judgements; the way and extent to which they draw boundaries around their faith community; the way they relate to external 'authorities' and their truth claims; the way they form their world view; and the way they understand and respond to symbols.<sup>49</sup> If these changes do occur then they offer a way of exploring those individuals with a growing faith (as opposed to a crisis of faith) and also of understanding the dynamics that occur for those who are changing their connection with faith communities. However, this is only true if we are able to equate leaving with changes in understanding (or maturity) of faith. For Jamieson this may indeed be reasonable as his work is with those who are exploring faith outside of the church. They are very clearly still seeking ways of expressing their faith. For those who leave 'accidentally' this may not be a valid approach. Their leaving is not the result of a struggle to form a new construction of faith. It is a result of a myriad of other things occurring in life. It may be possible to understand those other changes as creating the environment in which the stage changes suggested occur, but it is not a change in faith that has formed those conditions.

In summary, the literature around leaving has focused either on those who are leaving because of a crisis of faith or on those who leave because of disillusionment with the institution or congregation. There is a gap in the literature around those such as Dave, who leave because of life change events.

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<sup>49</sup> Jamieson, p.111.

## 2.3 Boundaries between leaving and belonging

As Dave leaves the church he has been a part of over his years at university, he finds himself in a strange place. To begin with it is just like the previous summers when he was not there for a few weeks but returned at the start of the new academic year. Only this time he isn't going to return. When he goes back to visit friends it's almost as if he is still part of the community, but things have changed. He doesn't recognise the new faces and is surprised by the small changes in the way things are done. Although things are very familiar he has a sense that he is no longer part of the community.

In their research Ward and Wild attempt 'to map the experience of being "betwixt and between" - in a state of chaos, being neither one thing nor another'.<sup>50</sup> In the context of their research into those leaving monastic communities they reflect upon the nature of the boundaries that mark belonging.<sup>51</sup> This shows echoes of the work of Douglas about markers of inclusion, where knowledge of expectations of behaviour serves to mark out who is or is not part of a community.<sup>52</sup> At times there are clear demarcations that show where someone is in relation to a boundary of belonging. At other times this is much more contested. The leaving of one community and joining another can be just such a place. The permeability of boundaries may form an important consideration in the exploration of leaving and belonging.

The concept of liminality is potentially valuable when considering how people such as Dave make the journey from one church community to another. The concept was developed in the work of Arnold van Gennep and later in the work

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<sup>50</sup> Ward and Wild, p.2.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concept of Pollution and Taboo*, (London: Routledge, 2002).

of Victor Turner.<sup>53 54</sup> From an anthropological perspective liminality is an intentional state forming part of a rite of passage. Van Gennep describes this rite of passage as a process that comprises three distinct phases: separation, liminal period and reassimilation.<sup>55</sup> Typically, the person undergoing the rite of passage is first stripped of the social status that he or she possessed before the rite, before entering into the liminal period of transition. Turner defines the liminal state as 'neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremony'.<sup>56</sup> Eventually they leave the liminal period and are re-assimilated into the community with a new status. There is normally a clear way into and out of the liminal state. For example, for an adolescent to become a warrior he is required to leave the village and go and survive alone in the bush for several days. His leaving is marked with particular events and his return is similarly marked and celebrated.

For Dave and others who are leaving churches as they graduate from university, it is questionable whether they really enter into what van Gennep would regard as a liminal state and at what point this may occur. It is possible to consider the period of university education as a liminal point since this has a clear entry (for most, completed schooling and leaving home) and a defined finish point (graduation). The period after university, however, does not have a defined exit ritual, nor is there any real sense of intentionality about it. Looking more specifically at the period after graduation in relation to church belonging it

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<sup>53</sup> Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, (London: Routledge, 1960).

<sup>54</sup> Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967).

<sup>55</sup> van Gennep.

<sup>56</sup> Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1995), p.95.



is clear that what might be described as a state of liminality (being between and betwixt church belonging) is simply a consequence of changed life situation. Dave graduates and gets a job that requires him to relocate. As such it is not something that is marked by a clear entry and exit point. Dave simply finds that he is no longer part of a community (both church and student) of which he was once a part. Although it takes time to establish new communities of belonging and acquire a new social status the intentional nature of entering a phase between two states is missing. Perhaps more usefully we could see what is happening in this context as a bridging transition. There is a desire to move from one state to the other but there is only a coincidental need for a boundary-spanning phase. In addition to this, the boundary-spanning phase is not framed by any form of ritual.

At this point further examination of Turner's work offers a different path. As well as describing liminality he also presents the concepts of marginality and inferiority. Where liminality can be thought of as being in the space between two states, marginality is being at the edge, and inferiority is being beneath. It is marginality that may be of use in considering those moving from university to life as a graduate. For Turner, marginality defines the state of simultaneously belonging to two or more social or cultural groups.<sup>57</sup> In Turner's words 'marginals like liminars are also betwixt and between, but unlike ritual liminars they have no cultural assurance of a final stable resolution of their ambiguity'.<sup>58</sup>

As I have noted, in many ways it is the university years which mark a liminal phase (in van Gennep's sense) for many young people: they have left home and school and undertaken a period of living that is intended to develop them as

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<sup>57</sup> Charles La Shure, 'What Is Liminality', (2005),  
<<http://www.liminality.org/about/whatisliminality/>> [accessed 05 November 2015].

<sup>58</sup> Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*, (Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 1974), p.233.

independent adults. University could be seen as representing a shift from childhood to adulthood, with the point of leaving representing a return to society in a new position. The reality for many students is that the point of graduation marks a moment of great uncertainty, particularly given the current pressure on graduate employment. For them, leaving university and graduation do not equate to their reincorporation into society but rather to a shift to the margin of a new community. Their marginality is marked by their limited access to the new community, a lack of employment stability and a lack of geographical stability.

As I have shown Dave's position in wider society is well described by Turner's concept of marginality. However, this still leaves the question of whether he is best described as a liminar or marginal in relation to his church leaving/belonging. Some, although by no means all, church communities deliberately mark the ending of the university year, recognising that it is a significant point in the lives of those who are moving on. This may offer a sense of ritual. Equally, within some church communities there are rituals attached to becoming a formal member, although a sense of belonging may be something different to formal membership (see 2.4.1 below). Where there is formal marking of both leaving and joining it is reasonable to argue that the gap between is liminal. It is certainly a 'betwixt and between' point in someone's life. However, for many students the formal markers are less evident. It is Turner's assertion that liminality comes with the cultural assurance of resolution that means the transition between church communities is one of marginality. There is no guarantee that Dave will find his way to a new place of belonging.

When considering the experience of Dave as he moves between church communities another potentially useful concept is Manuel Castells' idea of the network society.<sup>59</sup> He argues that society is made of more than just the physical geographical contacts that we have. It is a whole series of connections. This, he

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<sup>59</sup> Manuel Castells, *The Making of the Network Society*, (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 2001).

suggests, presents us with a reality in which there are differing degrees of linkage. Some are strong, others not so. The relative strength of these links may vary over time and under the influence of other factors. For example, a range of family linkages may be more important at times of bereavement when uncles and cousins who are rarely spoken to on a normal day-to-day basis suddenly become very significant. Thinking of society in this way means that connections can be picked up and dropped with relative ease, which in turn means that there is not necessarily a sense of relationships being broken as much as them being unmaintained. If we apply this thinking to church leaving and belonging we can see that the strength of linkage to a specific community (or congregation) may vary over time. Leaving can therefore be considered as part of a broader and ongoing process of changing relationships and linkages.

The networked approach suggests that the forming of linkages and relationships are influenced by many things. Studies exploring geographical mobility and religious involvement, for instance, show that time and stability are needed to form meaningful relationships.<sup>60 61</sup> Bibby looked at those in the USA who were moving inter-State and found that the principle of relationships needing time holds true whatever the context within which people find themselves. Times of change, such as relocation, put increasing demands upon the network of linkages. It is widely acknowledged that, for many now, life is a complex network of relationships and connections. For example Gibbs and Bolger quote a church leader from London: 'cultural expressions are now fluid and networked, place or geography are far less important these days. [Our church] has 90 percent network membership, and a significant 10 percent local

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<sup>60</sup> Robert Wuthnow and Kevin Christiano, 'The Effects of Residential Migration on Church Attendance in the USA', in *The Religious Dimension: New Directions in Quantitative Research*, ed. by Robert Wuthnow (New York: Academic Press, 1979), pp. 257-76.

<sup>61</sup> Reginald W. Bibby, 'Going, Going, Gone: The Impact of Geographical Mobility on Religious Involvement', *Review of Religious Research*, 38 (1997).

membership. Our culture [...] is fragmented and multilayered.’<sup>62</sup> Maintaining these relationships (and the network linkages they represent) inevitably becomes more complex with increasing network size given that there is only a finite time available for any individual to invest in the development and maintenance of their network of relationships. This is particularly pertinent when considering those graduating from University who may find themselves connected to an increasing number of networks (e.g. home, family, university, previous churches) that they wish to maintain, whilst forming new networks around their new geographical location, workplace and church communities. Furthermore a networked society brings in to question whether it is possible to neatly define someone as having left one community or found belonging in a new one. Old relationships remain and new relationships are formed and as this happens the strength of the linkages within the network changes. This gives further weight to Turner’s argument for marginality.

Another theory that might be useful in exploring the boundaries between leaving and belonging comes from the work of Thomas Tweed who explores religious geography. At the heart of Tweed’s work is his theory of crossing and dwelling.<sup>63</sup> Put simply, people move across and then settle in. The crossing requires that there is movement from one place to another; dwelling requires that, having crossed to somewhere, people stay there for some time (although the length of time is not fixed and dwelling does not have a sense of permanence to it). As people move they take their religion with them and they

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<sup>62</sup> Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures*, (London: SPCK, 2006), p.114.

<sup>63</sup> Thomas A. Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006).

employ this in ways that help them make the new place home.<sup>64</sup> For Tweed, religiosity and the sense of home are not static things but are dynamic, and the process of crossing and dwelling is one of working to orientate oneself in a new situation. He describes religions as 'partial, tentative, and continually redrawn sketches of where we are, where we've been and where we're going'.<sup>65</sup> This presents a compelling argument, particularly when considering Dave and others like him. They are at a stage of life that is characterised by a continual requirement to cross boundaries and create new places of dwelling. Faith may be an important component in their attempt to orientate themselves in new locations.

A question remains, however, about the validity of Tweed's theory in this application. Although Dave moves from one location to another and takes his religion with him, there are already established communities of faith in the location into which he is crossing. As such, he does not seek to establish an entirely new dwelling, but instead attempts to locate himself within an existing community. This is, in part, the challenge that Knot brings to Tweed's work. She questions whether his theory is able to extend beyond non-diasporic religion and whether it is able to distinguish between 'religion' and 'non-religion'.<sup>66</sup> Pushing this further we could ask whether Tweed's theory deals adequately with the nuances between religion, spirituality and faith<sup>67</sup>. The first of Knott's

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<sup>64</sup> Sonya Sharma and Mathew Guest, 'Navigating Religion between University and Home: Christian Students' Experiences in English Universities', *Social & Cultural Geography*, 14 (2012).

<sup>65</sup> Tweed, p.74.

<sup>66</sup> Kim Knott, 'Spatial Theory and the Study of Religion', *Religion Compass*, 2 (2008).

<sup>67</sup> For a discussion of religion/spirituality see Mathew Guest, 'In Search of Spiritual Capital: The Spiritual as a Cultural Resource', in *A Sociology of Spirituality*, ed. by Kieran Flanagan, Peter C. Jupp, and British Sociological Association: Sociology of Religion Study Group (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), pp. 181-200.

questions is perhaps answered by looking more widely to the literature about the geography of home.<sup>68</sup> Much of this literature is developed from the philosophy of Heidegger. In his essay 'Building, Dwelling, Thinking' he makes an ontological argument that 'dwelling is the basic character of Being, in keeping with which mortals exist'.<sup>69</sup> Dwelling at this level is not limited just to displaced peoples, but includes all humanity. It is also not limited to those who are the initiators of building, but is available to any who inhabit the structures that house human activity. Although the physical structure of a dwelling may be important, it is the fact that they help establish 'relations among each other, between themselves and dwellers, and between dwellers and the surrounding environment'<sup>70</sup> that is most significant. This allows us to understand dwelling as being as much concerned with the relationships that exist as with the physical structures within which this happens. The boundaries between leaving and belonging become about finding relationships which offer potential for new dwelling. Finding a new church to belong to (dwell in) is thus not about locating the pile of stone and glass in which worship takes place, it is about seeking the interactions between those who attend.

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<sup>68</sup> Alison Blunt and Robyn M. Dowling, *Home*, (London: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>69</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings from Being and Time (1927) to the Task of Thinking (1964)*, rev edn (London, 1993), p.362.

<sup>70</sup> Iris Marion Young, 'House and Home: Feminist Variations on a Theme', in *Intersecting Voices : Dilemmas of Gender, Political Philosophy, and Policy*, ed. by Iris Marion Young (Princeton, N.J., 1997), pp. 134-64, p.136.

## 2.4 Belonging to church

Dave tells us that, while at university, he belonged to a church. He went regularly to the same church during term time but he was not there every week because he was often away visiting friends. When he was there he enjoyed being part of a student group that used to meet for tea before the service. Dave also had a church back home that kept in touch with him and he went there when he was home during the vacation.

As well as understanding the process by which he left church it is also important that we consider exactly what it means to belong. Belonging is important in two ways. First, because it helps us to understand where someone has come from. For instance Dave may have belonged in two or more places. Secondly, it is also important in order to understand when the struggle to find a new church has come to an end. We are therefore presented with the key question 'how do we know that someone belongs?' Without an understanding of this it is not possible to fully address my research question.

### 2.4.1 Definitions of belonging

Within many Church traditions belonging is often strongly linked with formal church membership and being included on a church membership roll. For example, the Baptist Union of Great Britain says: 'When a person is baptised in a Baptist church, they normally become a church member.'<sup>71</sup> Within the Methodist church, membership has a strong sense of connecting the individual with the corporate and, over time, the understanding of membership has shifted to one that emphasises an expression of 'belonging'. This is a part of, but

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<sup>71</sup> Baptist Union of Great Britain, 'What Makes a Baptist?', (2011), <<http://www.baptist.org.uk/what-is-a-baptist/what-makes-a-baptist.html>> [accessed 01 August 2012].

distinct from an expression of 'believing'.<sup>72</sup> In this there is recognition of the completeness of membership of the body of Christ through baptism and, at the same time, acknowledgement of the importance of community aspects of membership. Drake speaks of the complexity of Methodist membership saying:

Some members show little more than a passing interest in the Church. Others, who are not formal members, contribute a lot of time and energy to the activities of their local Methodist Church. Still others are on the fringe of church life and are never really offered the opportunity to commit themselves further. Others again, stumble into membership without a clear idea of what membership involves [...] Then there are those who [...] simply look for a church that suits them and show little regard for formal systems of membership.<sup>73</sup>

Similar patterns are found across many denominations, but the literature shows that the concept of belonging to a church community is far more nuanced than any of these approaches to formalised membership suggest. Jamieson, for instance, shows that Church belonging is a complex network that may involve a whole range of different engagements with a community and a set of practices.<sup>74</sup> As such, it may be marked by a complex mix of attendance at Sunday services, membership of a home-group, being part of church outreach and attending or contributing to church programmes and activities. This suggests that the degree of involvement in 'belonging' and the commitment required to 'belong' is not something that is readily defined.

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<sup>72</sup> Philip Drake, 'Joining the Dots: Methodist Membership and Connectedness', in *Unmasking Methodist Theology*, ed. by Clive Marsh, et al. (London: Continuum, 2004), pp. 131-41.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid, p.131.

<sup>74</sup> Jamieson.



Although they do not define 'belonging' as such, Francis and Richter do define a range of concepts that are closely related to belonging in the context of church community including affiliation, belief, membership and practice.<sup>75</sup>

Affiliation is a widely used term that implies a minimal level of commitment to a particular religious community. It is used to describe those who would, in the national census, self identify as belonging to a particular religious group. Francis and Richter argue that this is 'too nebulous a definition and largely unrelated to actual church-going'<sup>76</sup> for them to treat someone who was an affiliate as a 'leaver'. Similarly, Voas and Crockett in their analysis of social trends data note that affiliation equates to passive belonging.<sup>77</sup> This is in contrast to attendance which they understand to be active belonging.

Belief is also seen by Francis and Richter as problematic because, from their perspective, it does not require any affiliation with a community of faith. This perspective is underlined by legal approaches to defining belief, seen for example in the creation of EU discrimination legislation where, although the central legislation does not define religion or belief, some individual member states have offered definitions. Thus Austrian legislation defines belief as 'a system of interpretation consisting of personal convictions concerning the basic structure, modality and functions of the world; it is not a scientific system.' And the Netherlands simply uses the term 'philosophy of life' in place of 'belief'.<sup>78</sup> Although the concept of 'belief' is itself difficult to define and operationalize (as

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<sup>75</sup> Francis and Richter, p.22-29.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid, p.23.

<sup>77</sup> Voas and Crockett.

<sup>78</sup> European Commission, 'Religion and Belief Discrimination in Employment - the EU Law', (Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities 2007), p.31.

evidenced by other studies of leaving and belonging which do not appear to offer clear definitions of belief) many would view it as an important requirement for belonging to a community of faith. Abby Day offers a more thorough treatment of the concept of belief.<sup>79</sup> Her qualitative research leads her to propose seven dimensions to belief: content (what people believe); sources (where those ideas originate); practice (how people put their belief into action); salience (how important beliefs are to people); function (the purpose of the belief); place (the location in which belief is embodied); and time (the place in history). Although this presents a thorough understanding of belief, which she further subdivides into anthropocentric and theocentric, the belonging that she describes does not have a requirement for any sense of association. Rather it is about creating and sustaining bonds between people. As such her approach to belief does not offer a helpful tool for exploring 'belonging' in relation to church communities.

Membership can be understood as an important marker of belonging, although it also presents difficulties as a concept. Francis and Richter illustrate this using the Church of England which has a range of potential markers of membership. These include those living in a parish, those who have received baptism, confirmation or regularly receive communion, or those who are on the electoral role of any given parish. This is not unique to the Church of England and is repeated in different denominations. Researchers also seem to be less than clear about how membership is defined. Roof, in his study of the baby boom generation and their quest to find spiritual meaning and belonging, mentions membership but offers no definition<sup>80</sup> whilst Jamieson does not give any attention to the term membership.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Day.

<sup>80</sup> Wade Clark Roof, *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation*, (New York: Harper Collins, 1994).

<sup>81</sup> Jamieson.

Practice, for much of the research literature, has become the means of defining belonging to a church community and is closely linked with community activity. This approach is not without problems. Again, different denominations have widely varied understandings of what 'practicing' might mean, and these may be at odds with how individuals understand their own practice. Orlowski uses practice as a marker of belonging in her work on 'church exiters', defining her research sample as those who had previously had 'regular and faithful church attendance'.<sup>82</sup> She does not, however, define 'regular', leaving the reader no clearer as to how someone is actually counted as belonging. Guest's research exploring Christian student experiences presents a typology of engagement with church that is derived from judgements about practice, and especially those around attendance at church activity.<sup>83</sup> This approach, while helpful in taking practice as a marker of belonging, falls short of examining what the true nature of that belonging really is. This means the typology offered is, in reality, one of degrees of affiliation.

Ultimately, the definition of belonging is one that is subjective and, in most of the literature on church leaving and belonging, the research participants appear to be self-defining as 'belongers'. There is a sense that belonging is affective; someone feels that they belong. This feeling of belonging may well have a variety of components to it. There may be expectations about what belonging means, both from the individual and also from the community in terms of the position that belonging confers, and the rights, privileges and responsibilities it may bring. The relational aspects of belonging are clearly important. Although it is the individual who tells us that they belong, they have to possess some sense of relating to the gathered community. That relating does not have to have a

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<sup>82</sup> Barbara Orlowski, 'Church Exiters: Ministering Restoration: Recovering Spiritual Harmony', (2010), <<http://www.churchexiters.com/>> [accessed 11 November 2010].

<sup>83</sup> Guest and others.

formalised component to it but it is like the glue that holds belonging together and has a more important place than the expectations that may also be there. In many ways if Dave tells us he belongs we can only accept his understanding and definition of that and work with him to gain a clearer understanding of how he constructs this.

### **2.4.2 Understanding belonging**

Defining belonging is only part of the story. Given the subjective nature of belonging, greater importance should be placed upon how we make sense of what belonging is and why it is so important. It is possible to look at this problem through a range of lenses each of which draws upon a set of literature from different disciplinary approaches. The different disciplines address different aspects of the same issue. They ask different types of questions about the nature of belonging and inevitably therefore offer different types of answers which compliment each other and allow for the development of a broader understanding of belonging than is possible from looking through a single lens.

In deciding which lenses to adopt there is a need to limit the potential range. Human geography, anthropology and psychology could all potentially offer insights, and consideration was given to these. However, the lenses chosen reflect the disciplines where current studies relating to leaving and belonging are rooted, as well as ensuring that the work is thoroughly grounded in theology. I have therefore chosen to look in some detail at sociological, cultural and theological perspectives on the nature of belonging.

#### **2.4.2.1 *Social capital and belonging***

Within the field of sociology the concept of social capital deals with how and why people belong to communities and groups. There is no single definition of social capital and the definitions that are used are, on the whole, very context specific. There are, however, a number of common features that appear across a range of definitions meaning that social capital is broadly understood to be

‘about the value of social networks, bonding similar people and bridging between diverse people, with norms of reciprocity’.<sup>84</sup>

Much of the research on social capital stems from the work of Robert Putnam, who initially examined democracy in Italy before turning to the USA and publishing his key text *Bowling Alone*.<sup>85</sup> For Putnam social capital is ‘connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them’.<sup>86</sup> Putnam makes a strong endorsement of the micro level of social capital (the person-person), but his analysis focuses upon group membership, which represents the meso level. His major thesis, that there is a decline in involvement in civil society, is attempting to describe the macro level.

The nature of social capital within the context of church membership may be understood at each of these three levels. At the micro level are connections with others who are part of the same congregation or small group within a large congregation (e.g. for Dave this was a group of students who formed part of the congregation at the service to which he regularly went). The meso level is that of the church (which may be made up of multiple congregations meeting at different times). For many, their choice of where to connect may be influenced by many things, but the result is identification with Church A rather than Church B. At the meso level, church affiliation may, at times, be over and against the wider sense of the denomination. For example, someone may be happy to be part of a conservative evangelical congregation but not entirely comfortable with

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<sup>84</sup> T. Claridge, ‘Social Capital and Natural Resource Management’, (unpublished master’s thesis, Brisbane: University of Queensland, 2004).

<sup>85</sup> Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

<sup>86</sup> Jenny M. Lewis, *Connecting and Cooperating: Social Capital and Public Policy*, (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2010).

the idea of membership of the much broader Anglican Church. Belonging to church at the macro level may be driven by a sense of community or family obligation (e.g. it is part of their heritage), or some wider sense of 'Big Society', with someone seeing active involvement in the Church as part of their commitment to that.<sup>87</sup> Each level may have some bearing on understanding those who consider themselves to belong to a given church community.

As well as making a distinction between connections at the micro, meso and macro levels, Putnam also makes a distinction between bonding social capital and bridging social capital. The former occurs when there are perceived shared identity relations. The latter occurs when there are networks forming of those from different backgrounds. In a church context, bonding social capital is likely to be at work within an individual church community where membership of that community becomes the shared identity. Bridging social capital may be seen between different church communities, or even denominations, where there is a weaker sense of shared identity (for example, the concept could be used to describe the Anglican communion).

Other approaches to social capital include that of Pierre Bourdieu who locates social capital as part of a wider dynamic of capital that includes both economic (money, property) and cultural (education) capital. For him, each form of capital is convertible into other forms. He defines social capital as:

The aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition – or in other words, to membership in a group – which provides each of its members with the

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<sup>87</sup> BBC News, 'Cameron and Clegg Set out 'Big Society' Policy Ideas', (2010), <[http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/mobile/uk\\_politics/8688860.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/mobile/uk_politics/8688860.stm)> [accessed 05 November 2010].

backing of the collectively-owned capital, a 'credential' which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word.<sup>88</sup>

Within this model, the amount of social capital (or any other form of capital) owned or controlled by an individual is important. Bourdieu argues that this depends on the size of the network of connections that the individual can mobilize as well as the amount of capital of different forms possessed by each of those with whom there is a network connection.<sup>89</sup> The strength of the linkages within the network may also affect the availability of capital, since links need to be sufficiently strong to allow the capital to be mobilized. Seen through this lens, being a Catholic carries a high degree of social capital as the Catholic church represents a large network which is able to mobilize a large amount of capital. Being a member of a small independent church carries less social capital, since there is a smaller network connection. Those connections, however, may be very strong meaning that the capital which resides within the network is relatively easy to access.

When Bourdieu moves to talking about the religious sphere he discusses what he terms religious capital.<sup>90</sup> Rey posits that this capital includes 'the legitimation of the social order, the sanction of wealth and power, and the sense of meaning that religion brings to people's lives'.<sup>91</sup> Bourdieu speaks of this capital in terms of 'les biens de salut' – 'the goods of salvation' by which he means the

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<sup>88</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, 'The Forms of Capital', in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. by John G. Richardson (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), pp. 241-58.

<sup>89</sup> Lewis, p.28.

<sup>90</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, 'The Genesis and Structure of the Religious Field', *Comparative Social Research*, 13 (1991).

<sup>91</sup> Terry Rey, 'Marketing the Goods of Salvation: Bourdieu on Religion', *Religion*, 34 (2004), p.337.

sacraments of the church and membership of a church community. In his catholic context both are regarded as essential for salvation. Bourdieu argues that the struggle for control of religious capital turns upon the separation of institution and laity. In other words, the church is able to manage the demand for the 'goods of salvation' from the laity by maintaining a clerical monopoly upon them. This reveals a key assumption in Bourdieu's argument. To him the primary function of religion is 'the legitimation of social inequality'.<sup>92</sup> This assumption, however, does not mark the difference between organized religious structures and faith, and does not take account of a theological understanding of the nature of sacraments. Theologically the sacraments are understood not as the 'goods of salvation' but as "signs, seals and pledges" of the work of God, focused narrowly upon the cross of Christ.<sup>93</sup> Sacraments are not the things that give salvation, but rather are tokens that make tangible the Divine action. Thus the possessing of the sacraments, the power to conduct them and to control their use, is not of such significance as Bourdieu supposes. In terms of the relationship between religious structures and faith, Bourdieu assumes that the goods of salvation are 'the pre-eminent forms of religious capital because of their contribution to the misrecognition that religions are not following material interest, but rather pursuing salvation, opposing evil, or realizing the sacred'.<sup>94</sup> This means that we only belong because (whether we admit it or not) we hope to gain from our belonging and that gain is a material one, here and now. This is counter to the experience we have seen above of those described by Jamieson as believing without belonging. For them there is no sense of religious capital in a corporate setting, yet still they are able to access the 'goods of salvation' through their individual faith.

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<sup>92</sup> Terry Rey, *Bourdieu on Religion: Imposing Faith and Legitimacy*, (London: Equinox, 2007), p.106.

<sup>93</sup> Timothy Bradshaw, *The Olive Branch: An Evangelical Anglican Doctrine of the Church*, (Carlisle: Paternoster Press 1992), p.179.

<sup>94</sup> Rey, p.337.



In recent years such observations have led to a distinct shift from talk of religious affiliation towards a more fluid sense of engagement with spirituality.<sup>95</sup> Verter examines the concept of spiritual capital, recognizing that Bourdieu's narrow conception of the religious field leads to an equally narrow understanding of religious capital.<sup>96</sup> For Verter, spiritual capital has three distinct forms. The 'embodied' is about the knowledge and understanding that individuals have. The 'objectified' is that in which the capital is linked to material objects, as well as knowledge that allows those to be deployed. The 'institutionalized' represents the power of religious organizations and, as such, resembles most closely Bourdieu's religious capital. Spiritual capital as described by Verter is a 'fluid, multi-faceted phenomenon, emerging from a variety of sources and taking on a variety of forms as it is actively negotiated within the lives of individuals, and amongst the networks in which they are active.'<sup>97</sup>

Although Bourdieu's concept of religious capital may be unhelpful in understanding the nature of church belonging, his work around field, habitus and community of practice may offer more helpful approaches. Bourdieu draws upon Weber's economy of salvation (or the 'religious market') and develops from this his understanding of the field.<sup>98</sup> The field is the space within which an individual engages in a struggle with others to control the production, control

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<sup>95</sup> Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion Is Giving Way to Spirituality*, (Malden: Blackwell, 2005).

<sup>96</sup> Bradford Verter, 'Spiritual Capital: Theorizing Religion with Bourdieu against Bourdieu', *Sociological Theory*, 21 (2003), p.157.

<sup>97</sup> Guest (2007).

<sup>98</sup> Max Weber, Guenther Roth, and Claus Wittich, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).

and consumption of capital. It is possible to have a range of fields each pertaining to different forms of capital and it is equally possible that the capital from one field can influence the interactions in another. Religious capital, or faith, for instance is likely to shape the way someone engages in every aspect of life. Although it is most readily accessed in the religious field it affects action in any field within which the individual is located. This has clear parallels with Bourdieu's concept of habitus which he describes as:

[...] principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes [...] Objectively "regulated" and "regular" without being in any way the product of obedience to rules, they can be collectively orchestrated without being the product of the organizing action of a conductor.<sup>99</sup>

Cockerham offers a broader explanation that helps show the full sense of what habitus encompasses:

[The concept of habitus] represents the cognitive map or set of perceptions that routinely guides and evaluates a person's choices and behavioral options. The habitus consists of enduring dispositions toward action deemed appropriate in particular social situations and settings, including habitual ways of acting when performing routine tasks. The influence of exterior social structures and conditions are incorporated into the habitus, as well as the individual's own inclinations, preferences, and interpretations. As a subjective construct, the concept of the habitus [...] seems to involve both dispositions toward action (as reflected in observable behavior) and the influence of the wider society (exterior social structures) on the individual.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1990), p.53.

<sup>100</sup> William C. Cockerham and Brian P. Hinote, 'Quantifying Habitus: Future Directions', in *Quantifying Theory: Pierre Bourdieu*, ed. by Karen Robson and Chris Sanders (Dordrecht: Springer, 2009), pp. 201-10.

As Mutch points out, Bourdieu suggests an explicit link between patterns of thought and social conditions, thus 'particular forms of social conditions produce particular forms of habitus'.<sup>101</sup> Habitus, and the dispositions associated with it, are applied across a range of different environments. The way in which they are applied depends on the individual's interactions with the constraints, demands and opportunities presented in any particular field or market.<sup>102</sup> This application can be at the unconscious level. A strong understanding of the constraints and demands of any situation enables individuals to operate in an effortless way. For example, there are conventions concerning the way in which a student behaves within a seminar. These conventions are a complex mix of wider social rules of behaviour and those specific to the role of student (as opposed to lecturer). These rules are assimilated over many years within an education system. Any seminar that a student attends will operate upon a similar structural system. It is only when the structures are different that the student will notice that they are not able to operate with a fluency that is normally present. Thus when a student from Korea is in a seminar, the rules they have assimilated are different to those that UK students use a cultural clash occurs. The Korean student is amazed at how rude the English students are as they argue with the lecturer, expressing views different to those he has expressed. The English students are left thinking that their Korean colleague does not understand the arguments being made and does not have any opinions to express. Although they have a working habitus, the rules of practice that they normally employ do not match the new context. Habitus is acquired through experience rather than formed through development.

From Bourdieu's treatment of habitus we may better understand a church community as a community of practice rather than a field. Practice for Bourdieu

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<sup>101</sup> Alistair Mutch, 'Communities of Practice and Habitus: A Critique', *Organizational Studies*, 24 (2003), p.389.

<sup>102</sup> Richard Jenkins, *Pierre Bourdieu*, rev. edn (London: Routledge, 2002).

is about what people do in society, and as such a community of practice is those who are connected to each other and do things in a similar way.<sup>103</sup> Those who are entering or leaving a church community are not entering or leaving the religious field but rather are assimilating into a new community of practice, a community who might 'do faith' differently.

#### **2.4.2.2 Consumer cultural perspectives of belonging**

During his first week at university Dave went to a 'church fair' organized by the Christian Union where he met people from lots of different churches. Over the rest of that term Dave visited a succession of churches trying to find a church that he felt was the best fit for him. When he left university Dave had a clear sense of what he wanted church to be like and expected to be able to find a church that offered him all the things he wanted.

Bauman's theory of liquid modernity offers a potentially useful way of understanding Dave's experience and behaviour as he searches for a church community.<sup>104</sup> Bauman's thesis departs from heavy modernity (which he associates with solid factories, controlling production, rules of behaviour, class orientated identities and structuralist assumptions) and moves towards something far more fluid. The concept of liquid modernity grows out of Bauman's observations of a society that changes at such a rate that organisations do not have time to solidify in the way that their predecessors did, and where the relationships that individuals have with such organisations become increasingly short encounters. This is strongly linked to consumerism which, as Bauman points out, always offers the possibility of a new start or, as he phrases it, 'to be born again'.<sup>105</sup> It requires little imagination to see the

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<sup>103</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

<sup>104</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, (Cambridge: Polity, 2000).

<sup>105</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Consuming Life*, (London: Polity Press, 2007), p.49.

engagement with church for those in Dave's situation as being in this liquid state. The encounters that he may have with church may be brief and potentially shaped by a consumerist desire. If the church chosen this week does not suit, it is possible to choose a new one next week.

The development of consumer culture and its' role in contemporary society is widely documented.<sup>106</sup> Part of this discussion focuses on the role of consumption in the construction of identity. Descartes' famous phrase 'cogito ergo sum' is, in our consumption driven society, replaced by 'tesco ergo sum' – I shop therefore I am. Veblen first posited the theory of conspicuous consumption,<sup>107</sup> which Bauman links to the creation of identities that are sufficiently differentiated to show that someone belongs.

One thinks of identity whenever one is not sure of where one belongs; that is, one is not sure how to place oneself among the evident variety of behavioural styles and patterns, and how to make sure that people around would accept this placement as right and proper.<sup>108</sup>

With the pervasiveness of western consumer culture our approaches to God and especially to Church have inevitably been shaped in ways that previous generations would not have foreseen. The tendency towards McDonaldization

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<sup>106</sup> Martyn J. Lee, *The Consumer Society Reader*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000).

<sup>107</sup> Thorstien Veblen, 'The Theory of the Leisure Class', in *The Collected Works of Thorstien Veblen*, ed. by Peter Cain (London: Routledge, 1899), pp. 1-404.

<sup>108</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, 'From Pilgrim to Tourist - or a Short History of Identity', in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. by Stuart Hall and Paul De Gay (London: Sage, 1996), pp. 18-36 (p.19).

in the reproduction of religion is well documented.<sup>109 110 111 112</sup> For example, students arriving at university who are seeking a church, will have a shopping list of things that they want that church to provide. This could include lively music, people like them, or mass at a convenient time. Church websites give a glimpse into the world of differentiated identity, with attempts to show what makes each one unique and why you might prefer to belong to this rather than that. In the attempt to find church there is what Bauman terms the shift from pilgrim to tourist. The pilgrim inhabits the orderly, predictable world and journeys on through time always looking heavenwards, always remembering the eternal destination. The tourist moves deliberately from one thing to the next seeking the novel, with the chance to retreat 'home' where the masks can be put down.<sup>113</sup>

In a recent blog article, Jason Hess wrote about the regular experience of driving for 30 minutes and past multiple churches to get to 'his' church. He said:

Regardless of how close or how far someone lives from their place of

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<sup>109</sup> George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society*, New Century edn (Thousand Oaks Sage, 2000).

<sup>110</sup> John Drane, *The McDonaldization of the Church: Spirituality, Creativity and the Future of the Church*, (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2000).

<sup>111</sup> John Drane, *After McDonaldization: Mission, Ministry and Christian Discipleship in an Age of Uncertainty*, (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2008).

<sup>112</sup> Mathew Guest, 'The Reproduction and Transmission of Religion', in *The Oxford Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*, ed. by Peter B. Clarke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 651-70.

<sup>113</sup> Bauman (1996).

worship the real issue at stake isn't finding a church but rather connecting and plugging into a church that resonates with you and your family.<sup>114</sup>

His comment takes us to the heart of the consumerist mind. Belonging to a church is simply one of a myriad of consumer choices. This should come as no surprise when, as Pete Ward says, 'shopping characterizes all of contemporary life'.<sup>115</sup> For church to be in that same arena requires simply that there is a range of choices on offer. That choice could be as simple as church or not.

Hess's comment also shows how easily consumer culture subverts desire. In Augustine's terms, consumer culture encourages us to see items of 'use' as objects of desire.<sup>116</sup> Consumer culture has the potential to distort the desire for God through two mechanisms - seduction or misdirection. Seduction plays on our relationship with objects. In a consumerist culture we are not focused on a single object but our attention and desire is stretched across an endless series of potential objects. We are seduced into consumption by the prolonging of desire and the channeling of the inevitable disappointments that accompany it. Although a church may appear to offer someone all that they need, they are seduced into thinking that something even better might be just around the corner.<sup>117</sup> Consumption can also be symbolic, and at this point the idea of misdirection appears. This is seen in the development of an advertising strategy which associates commodities with desires. In such a strategy, consumers are

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<sup>114</sup> Jason Hess, 'The Great Church Search', in *Red Letter Christians*, ed. by Tony Campolo (2011).

<sup>115</sup> Pete Ward, *Liquid Church*, (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2002), p.58.

<sup>116</sup> Saint Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, *De Doctrina Christiana*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

<sup>117</sup> Vincent J. Miller, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture*, (London: Continuum, 2004), p.125.

encouraged to fulfill their desires through consumption. This means that a practice (consumption) displaces a value.<sup>118</sup>

#### **2.4.2.3 Theological perspectives of belonging**

Pete Ward takes Bauman's theory of liquid modernity and applies it to the church.<sup>119</sup> His application of the theory challenges the assumptions that attendance at church (one of the regular markers of membership) equates to faithfulness, that size of congregations is important, that a single style of worship is suitable for all and that the church has developed a self-understanding of a membership organisation or club.<sup>120</sup> In his analysis, Ward draws upon some important theological themes, especially in relation to belonging. Rather than focussing upon the nature of the church (ecclesiology) he turns to the idea of Body of Christ drawing upon James Dunn's<sup>121</sup> exploration of Pauline theology which notes that 'in Christ' is a key organising metaphor for Paul's theology.<sup>122</sup> The metaphor has multiple layers of meaning. At its most simple it is used to refer to the act of salvation. 'So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new.' (II Corinthians 5. 15.)

This, as Sanders argues, is one of the key strands of Paul's Christology – the work of Christ.<sup>123</sup> Dunn explores further the phrase 'in Christ' using three

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Ward (2002).

<sup>120</sup> Ibid, p.17ff.

<sup>121</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

<sup>122</sup> Ward, (2002), p.34f.

<sup>123</sup> E. P. Sanders, *Paul*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p.77.



categories, the last of which is concerned with how we might understand Paul's ministry being 'in Christ'.<sup>124</sup> For Paul, the believer has been taken up into the very life of Christ and is incorporated into the body of Christ. Not only is the individual taken into Christ, but Christ is also indwelling in the believer. 'I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who lives, but it is Christ who lives in me.' (Galatians 2: 19f.)

This mutual indwelling is described in individual terms but links also into Paul's ecclesiology in which the corporate is central. Here again we encounter the metaphor of the Body of Christ (I Corinthians 12. 22, Romans 12. 4-5, Colossians 1. 18, Ephesians 4. 12, Romans 12. 4-5). Paul's emphasis is on a body that is given life through the Holy Spirit.<sup>125</sup> Thus, an individual is made one with Christ and Christ indwells in them. But also, through this same action, individual believers are united into the body of Christ. Being part of the body of Christ does not depend on where someone is or how often they attend church, it is dependent on their connection with Christ. As Dunn says:

The identity of the Christian assembly as "body" however, is not given by geographical location or political allegiance but by their common allegiance to Christ (visibly expressed not least in baptism and the sacramental sharing in his body).<sup>126</sup>

This challenges the concepts of belonging that we have so far encountered. Belonging cannot be viewed as merely a sociological or organising concept. Being joined to Christ in the act of salvation means that we are joined to the body of Christ. This dual joining is at the heart of a theology of church. It does

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<sup>124</sup> Dunn, p.397f.

<sup>125</sup> Timothy Luke Johnson, 'Paul's Ecclesiology', in *The Cambridge Companion to St Paul*, ed. by James D. G. Dunn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p.206.

<sup>126</sup> Dunn, p.551.

not describe a membership organisation that is able to judge whether someone is a member or not. Given the soteriological element in becoming one 'in Christ' it is only God and the individual who are truly able to determine whether they really belong.

Seen theologically, belonging 'in Christ' is the outworking of a desire for a relationship with God, which itself is a natural part of humanity and part of our very being. Augustine of Hippo in the opening words of his Confession says:

Man is one of your creatures, Lord, and his instinct is to praise you. [...] The thought of you stirs him so deeply that he cannot be content unless he praises you, because you made us for yourself, and our hearts find no peace until they rest in you.<sup>127</sup>

In contrast to consumer perspectives on desire, Augustine is describing an urge that is something more than the economically or culturally created want to improve the personal situation of an individual. The fulfillment of this desire is not to be found in the formality of structure and control of religious institutions, but rather in the personal faith of an individual, which, in turn is mediated through the action of the Holy Spirit.

Klaas Bom suggests that desire for God works at three different levels: lover's desire; seeker's desire; ontological desire.<sup>128</sup> Lover's desire is that which is seen in the Old Testament. 'As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God?' (Psalm 42. 1-2)

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<sup>127</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, (Harmonsworth: Penguin, 1961), p.21.

<sup>128</sup> Klaas Bom, 'Directed by Desire: An Exploration Based on the Structures of the Desire for God', *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 62 (2009), p.138f.

Song of Songs, read in an allegorical sense is also full of the language of the lover's desire for God. This sense of desire is extended into the New Testament with Paul's expression of his desire to be with Christ.

For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labour for me; and I do not know which I prefer. I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better? (Philippians 1. 21-23)

Bom's second level is that of the seeker's desire. This he sees as a more generalised desiring for happiness. This is perhaps suggested in some of the wisdom literature, notably Ecclesiastes:

I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with.<sup>11</sup> He has made everything suitable for its time; moreover, he has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; moreover, it is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil. (Ecclesiastes 3. 10-13)

Bom argues that

[...] at the seeker's level, desire refers to the drive behind choices. Traditionally, theologians have denied that the lover's desire is the natural perfection of the seeker's. Not recognizing the source of happiness will lead to concupiscence, the abuse of this desire.<sup>129</sup>

His point is similar to that made by Augustine when he speaks of the confusion of those things which are to be 'used' with those that are to be 'enjoyed'.

Augustine describes the difference thus: 'to enjoy something is to hold fast to it in love for its own sake. To use something is to apply whatever it may be to the

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid, p.139.

purpose of obtaining what you love'.<sup>130</sup> He illustrates this difference by talking of a traveler who is trying to return home, who 'uses' modes of transport to make that possible. This is contrasted with someone who becomes so caught up with 'enjoying' the journey and the things he encounters upon it that ultimately he never reaches his homeland.

Augustine continues:

We must use this world [cf. I Corinthians 7. 31], not enjoy it, in order to discern 'the invisible attributes of God, which are understood through what has been made' [Romans 1. 20] or, in other words, to derive eternal and spiritual value from corporeal and temporal things. The things which are to be enjoyed, then, are the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, and the Trinity that consists of them, which is a kind of single, supreme thing, shared by all who enjoy it.<sup>131</sup>

Thus we see that, for Augustine, only God is to be desired and all other things are only to be used in our quest for that proper object of our desire. This is in contrast to the messages of a consumer society which encourages us to enjoy those things we are supposed to be using, making them the focus of our desire.

The third level of desire is ontological desire. This, for Bom, possesses four key characteristics: It is an 'inclination of the whole person and therefore intrinsic in every faculty of our humanity';<sup>132</sup> it is 'a passive inclination to the vision of God, which can only receive fulfillment from God'; it is revealed by God meaning that 'Human beings can not know this orientation to God, other than by divine revelation'; and finally, 'the desire for God is made active by God's grace'.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Augustine, p.9.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid, p.10.

<sup>132</sup> Bom, p.140.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid, p.141.

This desire is not something that is seen simply within the church, but also in the believer who is not part of a particular church community.

The theological perspectives on belonging discussed thus far have largely focused on what it means to belong to the Body of Christ rather than what it means to belong to the Church (or even a church). These insights could be used to build a persuasive argument for a wholly churchless faith. Those who are part of the Body of Christ, however, are also called to 'build each other up in love.' (1 Thessalonians 5. 11.) Primarily this happens within the context of worship as a community where we are offered the 'gift of participating through the Spirit in the incarnate Son's communion with the Father and his mission from the father to the world, in a life in wonderful communion'.<sup>134</sup> My research is concerned with belonging in this context and with understanding how individuals first identify and then find belonging in a local expression of the universal church. They are those who have found that 'by grace we are given to participate in the life, ministry, sufferings, death, resurrection and continual intercessions of him who is the Head of the Body'.<sup>135</sup>

David Ford, in his exploration of Christian wisdom, offers the vision of the Church as a school of desire and wisdom. He draws upon the book of Revelation, examining the letters to the churches, each combining 'knowledge, judgment, instruction, guidance, encouragement and promises'.<sup>136</sup> He suggests that each of the promises invites the recipient to desire communion with God. This invitation is to both individual and community. 'The visionary wisdom for these churches is rooted in worship and shapes their desires and hopes

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<sup>134</sup> James Torrance, *Worship, Community, and the Triune God of Grace*, (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1996), p.60.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid, p.73.

<sup>136</sup> David F. Ford, *Christian Wisdom: Desiring God and Learning in Love*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p.253.

through promises'.<sup>137</sup> The church is seen, then, as a school for desire, in which the individual as a member of the body of Christ is grown and developed, encouraged and challenged, and it is the local church that offers the arena in which the desire for God can be most readily directed. It is in being part of a worshipping community that both individuals and the gathered body are drawn into communion with God. It is in belonging to a local church that the individual is best equipped to grow and develop in faith and can be encouraged to do so. Being able to find new communities to belong to is therefore vital for the continuation in a journey of faith.

## 2.5 Summary

I began by considering Dave and his experience of trying to find a new church. In the literature relating to churchgoing there are a number of weaknesses. First, there is a clear gap in exploring the experience of those who move between churches because of positive life change experiences. Studies instead focus on the experiences of those who have left the church, often for good. Second, there are no clear definitions of church belonging. Studies instead focus on patterns of church attendance and membership and use a range of working definitions which makes clear navigation difficult. Third, studies do not pay close attention to what belonging to a church means for individuals. This means that there is a need to develop a more nuanced understanding of how and why individuals come to belong to church communities, using approaches that take seriously the experience of the individual in discovering places of belonging.

I have considered a range of perspectives on belonging using the three lenses of social capital, consumer culture and theology. I have shown how social capital may be used to explain someone's motivation for belonging and how

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid, p.253.

Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and field of practice may offer potential routes for understanding an individual's interactions with church communities. I have explored how the cultural context and the forming of identity may influence the way in which choices about belonging are made, noting particularly the challenges presented by an increasingly secularized culture. Using the concept of the Body of Christ I have considered how belonging is rooted in the relationship with Christ rather with the church. I have also offered the concept of desire for God as an alternative to that of the increasingly pervasive consumer culture.

The following chapter will describe in detail the creation of a practical method to explore the experience of individuals as they seek new church communities to belong to, following graduation. The method will allow data to be collected in such a way as to take seriously the questions asked through the different lenses I have outlined in this chapter.

## 3 Methodology

### 3.1 Methodological framework

#### 3.1.1 Selecting a research philosophy

Each individual trying to navigate through the post-university waters is engaged in a process of sense-making as they attempt to navigate through a complex and ambiguous world in which they find themselves submerged. This sense making is part of creating meaning and is something that people do as a matter of course in ordinary life. It is about the interpretation of experience with reference to some broader structure or understanding of the world. For individuals, the reference points could include their economic situation, the ethnic group they are part of, or their understanding of God's providence to them. These meaning systems don't appear out of a vacuum; rather, as McGuire notes, meaning systems are highly individualised and are shaped by social contexts and interactions.<sup>138</sup> Those who are seeking new church belonging do so in contexts comprised of a wide variety of things. These include their previous experience of church and of belonging, their friendships, and the culture and society that they inhabit. Although it would be possible in researching their belonging to do so from a single perspective (for example, observing discrete consumerist, social or theological acts) the sense making that the individuals are involved in occurs across the whole range of these contexts. This means that their sense making needs to be conceived of as a single act that has multiple facets to it, and which may be expressed differently by different individuals, and indeed may be expressed differently at different times by the same individual.

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<sup>138</sup> Meredith B. McGuire, *Religion: The Social Context*, (Belmont, Calif: Wadsworth, 1992), p.31.



These observations pushed me to ask epistemological questions about the reality of what could be observed across a range of individuals seeking belonging in new church communities and about how to select a coherent frame with which to take account of the stratified nature of the field of enquiry. Philosophical realism offered me a potential framework within which to work. There are a wide range of variously nuanced definitions of realism, but there is a key distinctive feature of all. As Maxwell defines it

[...] they deny that we can have any objective or certain knowledge of the world, and accept the possibility of alternative valid accounts of any phenomenon. All theories about the world are seen as grounded in a particular perspective and worldview, and all knowledge is partial, incomplete and fallible.<sup>139</sup>

To put it another way, we can have genuine knowledge of the world that is observed, but that knowledge is framed by the observer's identity and experiences. A different observer possesses a different identity and may therefore have different ways of seeing the same phenomena. Taking an approach to observation that uses different lenses with which to interpret that which is observed takes seriously the idea that the knowledge we have of an individual's (or a group of individuals') belonging is only ever partial. Indeed, the fact that it is possible to use differing lenses shows that each one only presents us with a partial view. In some regards the differing lenses - consumerist, social capital and theological - present descriptions of social structure, behaviour and meaning. These are not separate from each other. The way in which the social structure is understood does not necessarily reflect or determine the cultural behaviour, and the behaviour may or may not be related to the meaning. From a realist perspective social structure, behaviour and meaning are all real phenomena. They are not reflections of, or determined from, each other.

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<sup>139</sup> Joseph A. Maxwell, *A Realist Approach to Qualitative Research*, (London: Sage, 2012), p.5.

Rather, they have some form of interaction and interdependence.<sup>140</sup> This is at variance with a scientifically objective perspective rooted in a positivist epistemology that claims ‘there is only one fully correct way in which reality can be divided up into objects, properties, and relations’.<sup>141</sup>

Adopting this realist perspective as a framework means that I am taking the ontological stance that it is possible to see the world as existing independent of our own perceptions and theories. At the same time I am taking the epistemological stance that there are multiple ways of seeing this world.<sup>142</sup> This means that my understanding and that of my research participants ‘is inevitably a construction from our own perspectives and standpoints’.<sup>143</sup> The realist stance also has the advantage of chiming with the theological understanding of the world epitomised by Hilary Putnam when he says that there is no possibility of reaching a ‘God’s eye view’.<sup>144</sup> Within a practical theology research project there is also a need to recognise that our knowledge can only ever be partial. To borrow St. Paul’s words

For we know only in part [...] but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. (I Corinthians 13. 9 - 10,12).

### 3.1.2 Selecting a research methodology

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid, p.161.

<sup>141</sup> George Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal About the Mind*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p.265.

<sup>142</sup> Mario Bunge, 'Realism and Antirealism in Social Science', *Theory and Decision*, 35.

<sup>143</sup> Maxwell, p.5.

<sup>144</sup> Hilary Putnam, *The Threefold Cord: Mind, Body, and World*, (New York; Chichester: Columbia University Press, 1999).

In approaching research from a realist perspective the design becomes something more than a collection of abstract formal plans concerning the way in which a piece of research is to be conducted. As Maxwell points out, ‘the actual conceptions of and plans for research held by the researcher are real parts of people’s meanings, motives, and understandings, and have consequences for the conduct of the research.’<sup>145</sup> This is particularly true within a piece of practical theology, such as this study, in which the field of enquiry is derived from my professional practice as a chaplain ahead of my engagement with it as a researcher.

Beyond the conceptual planning of the research, the real meanings, motives and understandings that I, as the researcher, hold have also impacted on the way that the research was conducted, as well as the decisions and choices that were made as challenges occurred within the research. As Maxwell says, ‘the conduct of the research ‘on the ground’ is itself a real phenomenon that may differ substantially from what was planned, and even from what the researcher *thinks* is happening.’<sup>146</sup> In practice this meant that the research design, although carefully thought through before fieldwork commenced, was not static. Instead it became a reflexive and iterative process that linked research questions, conceptual framework, and methods, while also paying attention to the validity of claims made through the analytical processes that I adopted.

My experience working as a chaplain in Higher Education has enabled me to develop an initial and partial understanding of some of the issues faced by students who are about to leave university and are clear about wanting to find a new church to belong to when they have relocated. I have seen that many of them experience challenges not just in finding a new church but also in navigating the turbulent waters of life post-university, which often bring changes

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<sup>145</sup> Maxwell, p.71.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid, p.71.

of employment and location. I have been able to develop this understanding through casual observation of groups of students over a number of years, suggesting that some form of observation could provide a rich source of data from which to develop a deeper understanding of the pressures they face and the strategies that they adopt as they seek to navigate and find belonging in their new environments. In line with a realist perspective, my chosen approach to observation needed to be one that offered an emphasis on depth rather than breadth so as to 'produce data which are better able to reflect the detail, the subtleties, the complexity and the interconnectedness of the social world it investigates'.<sup>147</sup> I reasoned that emphasising depth would enable me to develop a clearer sense of the forces that shape the decisions and actions of the participants whilst this richness of data would also help me to 'rule out spurious associations and premature theories'.<sup>148</sup> I also realised that the time that I invested in observation (whatever form that may take) in and of itself would not be sufficient. There was a need for the data generated to be such that it provided as full a picture of what was happening as possible and that that picture is able to reveal the processes that are involved. My reflections on the methodological requirements for this study led me towards a qualitative longitudinal methodology.

### **3.1.2.1 Qualitative research – working with depth**

Much of the previous research on people's experiences of leaving and belonging to church communities has employed a mixed methods approach –

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<sup>147</sup> Martyn Denscombe, *The Good Research Guide for Small-Scale Social Research Projects*, second edn (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2003), p.202.

<sup>148</sup> Maxwell, p.43

combining quantitative surveys with in-depth interviews.<sup>149 150 151</sup> In exploring the faith of students at English universities, Guest took a similar approach.<sup>152</sup> His initial work was quantitative in nature and took the form of a large-scale online survey of 4500 students which focused on moral and religious perspectives, religious practices, and general demographic data.<sup>153</sup> This work provided a broad picture of the place of religion across the student population. The second part of his research involved conducting qualitative individual and group interviews with a smaller sample of self-identifying 'Christian' students and university staff. The aim of this second part of the work was 'to probe deeper to discover the forms of Christian identity students affirmed and to understand how the university experience shaped these students'.<sup>154</sup> This dual approach illustrates the value of employing different research methods to address different types of question. The quantitative part of this research gives an excellent overall perspective of the place of Christian faith among undergraduate students and enables critique to be made of literature that lays claim to universities as secular spaces. The qualitative aspect explores more deeply the texture and meaning of Christian identities and how they are lived by a small sample of students.

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<sup>149</sup> Richter and Francis.

<sup>150</sup> Francis and Richter.

<sup>151</sup> Jamieson.

<sup>152</sup> Guest and others (2013).

<sup>153</sup> Mathew Guest, 'Religion and the Cultures of Higher Education: Student Christianity in the UK', in *Issues in Religion and Education: Whose Religion?*, ed. by Lori G. Beaman and Leo Van Arragon (Leiden: Brill, 2015), pp. 346-66.

<sup>154</sup> Mathew Guest and others, 'Challenging 'Belief' and the Evangelical Bias: Student Christianity in English Universities', *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 28 (2013), p.208.

Within my research I was interested in discovering the experience of students. I wanted to do this in depth so as to be able to explore the influences upon them as they sought belonging and to discover the nuances between different people's experiences. This led me to taking a qualitative approach to the research. With any research approach there are always shortcomings. My choice of a qualitative approach means that I am not able to describe how many students continue to belong to church communities at a time point after graduation. Nor am I able to show how many of those who had been parts of churches were no longer. Taking a qualitative approach did, however, allow me pay very close attention to the social and cultural contexts of each research participant, something which is required within a realist framework.

### ***3.1.2.2 Longitudinal research - working across time***

As I have already noted the period immediately after graduation is a turbulent one for many and often features multiple changes of context (e.g. employment, location or relationships). This turbulence can last for a considerable period of time. Against that background I reasoned that being able to observe how change happened across time would be particularly important in forming an understanding of my participant's experiences of seeking belonging in new church communities.

Longitudinal approaches are temporal in nature and so offer researchers the potential to 'slice through time', presenting the possibility of obtaining rich data about how a group of individuals who had previously belonged to a church community sought belonging in a new church. The approach can be constructed in a way that either enables data to be collected at fixed points in time or in a more continuous manner throughout the duration of the fieldwork period.

One of the major advantages of a longitudinal approach is that, rather than the experience of the participant being presented through their recall at a distance from the event (as would be the case if a single interview were used after the event that was being studied had occurred), data are generated at the point of

the incident occurring, or very close to that. This means that details that are significant at the time are recorded rather than those that come to be seen as more significant at a later date. For example, someone visiting a church for the first time may note things about the way in which they were greeted. When reflecting upon why they remained part of that church at a future point, they may talk about the quality of the teaching, something that initially they may not have noticed and only built an understanding of over a numbers of weeks and months.

Qualitative longitudinal research also presents a number of practical and theoretical challenges. These include the possibility that participants may leave the study before data collection has been completed. One of the keys to overcoming this issue of attrition is the development of a sustainable and positive researcher/participant relationship. This could involve providing participants with feedback to encourage them to feel that their contributions are worthwhile and valued. As well as offering a partial solution to sample attrition it is possible that this relationship could itself skew the research, meaning that it is important for the researcher to work in such a way that their involvement does not unduly impact upon the behaviour of the participants.

Within this research project these issues were particularly pertinent. As an ordained minister who works as a University Chaplain I recognised that I would have a deep concern for the faith of the participants and would want to see them continue in their journey of faith. Adopting a qualitative longitudinal approach would give me the opportunity to develop some understanding of their preferred styles of worship and the things that were important to them in terms of their belonging. Also, in some cases, I knew the churches in the city to which the participant moved. In my role as a chaplain I would usually use this information to suggest a church that they might like to attend. This may also be something that the participant themselves would usually seek out from a chaplain (or indeed any church minister with knowledge of the city in which they are living). I knew, however, that in the context of this research I would need to treat my roles as a researcher and priest separately in order to avoid unduly

influencing my participants' behaviour. In practice this meant that even when my participants presented me with situations where I would normally have intervened I made a conscious choice not to do so. Since this was not an easy decision pastorally I ensured that, in my encounters with them, I included data gathering questions that would help them to identify their own sources of advice and support.

## **3.2 Sampling strategy**

As with any qualitative research the purpose of this research is to 'understand the processes, meanings, and local contextual influences involved in the phenomena of interest, for the specific settings or individuals studied'.<sup>155</sup> As such, the selection of potential participants is not driven by a need for them to be representative or comparable. It is instead about finding a group of people who exhibit the phenomena that is of interest. My research question is about how people find a new church when they move from one they have been part of. This means the potential participants need to be on the cusp of both leaving University and the church they attended whilst there and seeking a new one to join.

### **3.2.1 Identifying a sample – sample characteristics**

In identifying a potential sample there were four initial choices to be made. The first concerned which university (or type of university) participants might come from. The second concerned what sort of church participants might have belonged to while at university. The third was around ensuring that research participants had previously belonged to churches. The fourth was that participants were actively seeking a new church to belong to.

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<sup>155</sup> Maxwell, p.94.



The first choice (which university) seemed important because it might determine the types of values, beliefs and preferences held by the participants and/or the attitudes and educational experiences participants had been shaped by to that point. Often there is a tendency towards seeing students as homogenous groupings, suggesting that all students who attend a particular type of university will be similar types of people. Closer consideration quickly challenges this idea. For example the Leeds University Union commissioned a piece of research work looking at the profile of their student community and identified six distinct groupings.<sup>156</sup> These were not what would be considered sub-cultures as the groupings did not have distinct identities and some form of boundaries that marked those<sup>157</sup>. Instead they represented similarities between different students who may or may not have any form of association with each other. There is also an argument that the type of higher education institution that students attend may also shape some of their behaviours and attitudes. The different groupings in English Higher Education hint at this (e.g. The Russell Group, The Post 92 Group, The Cathedrals Group all of which have distinctly different corporate cultures).<sup>158</sup> However, these groupings are likely to say more about the attitudes and approaches to research and teaching held by the institutions than they do about the types of students who attend those institutions. However helpful such broad-brush pictures are, anyone who works with students realises that they, and the institutions they attend, are all unique. Beyond these considerations about the homogeneity (or otherwise) of students from particular universities, there is also a broader point which relates to my choice of research paradigm. The realist approach suggests that each participant can and should be considered separately, with their experience

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<sup>156</sup> Leeds University Union, 'Leeds University Union Segmentation Research', (Leeds: Leeds University Union, 2014).

<sup>157</sup> Ken Gelder, *The Subcultures Reader*, (London: Routledge, 2005).

<sup>158</sup> Guest and others (2013).

being significant in its own right. It may be possible to look across the experience of a range of participants and discover similarities or trends that influence their behavioural choices, but that is not the key motivation driving the methodology. I therefore decided that the type of university participants attended would not determine my sample selection.

The second choice concerned the type of church that potential participants had attended as a student since this could have a significant impact upon how someone looked for belonging beyond their time at university. Some denominations have a very strong sense of identity and culture that inevitably shapes the attitudes to finding church for its members, for example the Roman Catholic Church. In many ways I was not so interested in those who were part of such communities, as they do not appear to represent the parts of the church where there is a problem with loss of members at points of transfer. I therefore chose not to include those who had been members of Catholic churches or chaplaincies.

The third choice related to trying to ensure that those who were part of the research had previously had a strong sense of belonging to a church. At the outset of the research the most readily available indicator of belonging was the length of time that someone had been part of a church community. For this reason I chose to recruit those who had been actively involved in a church for at least one year while at university.

Finally my research was concerned with how those who were moving beyond university life found new places of belonging. I needed to ensure that participants would be actively engaging in a process of finding a new church and that they would be doing that outside the university landscape. I therefore chose to rule out those who were immediately going on to further study because they were likely to again be in an environment where churches were geared up to welcome students. I also ruled out those who were going to be working for church organisations that had an expectation about where someone would attend church.

Eventually a suitable sample was drawn from two university towns in the north of England. Participants had attended one of three universities. All were leaving the university they had been undergraduates at. They had all been actively involved in a church in their university town for at least the last year of their studies. At the point of recruitment to the research project not all were certain as to where they would be living post-graduation, or what they might be doing in terms of employment.

### **3.2.2 Determining sample size**

All research presents the challenge of determining a suitable sample size.<sup>159</sup> There are attractive possibilities of working with both large and small samples. A large sample may appear attractive in offering the possibility of reaching conclusions that may offer generalisable results. Small sample studies offer the potential to explore in much more depth the experiences of participants.

With a longitudinal study, however, the question of sample size is more complex than the simple question of 'how many interviews are enough?' This question is closely linked to the concept of saturation - the point at which nothing new is learnt from conducting further interviews. When working with individuals and seeking to discover their experience unfolding over time saturation could never be reached. Each individual has a unique experience that continues to unfold across time as their context continues to change around them. When comparing the experience of individuals, although there may be commonalities between them, their experiences remain unique. Having an ever-greater number of participants in such a study does not present the possibility of saturation (in the sense that nothing new is discovered).

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<sup>159</sup> Sarah Elsie Baker and Rosalind Edwards, 'How Many Qualitative Interviews Is Enough? Expert Voices and Early Career Reflections on Sampling and Cases in Qualitative Research', *National Centre for Research Methods Review Paper*, (2012).

Despite this, I still needed to consider an appropriate sample size that would be both meaningful and manageable. To do this I considered other research studies that had employed a similar qualitative longitudinal methodology. Jindal-Snape conducted a study with those leaving higher education and moving in to professional practice. The longitudinal study, which was conducted over a period of 12 months post-graduation, used a sample size of 9 participants.<sup>160</sup> Herzbrun conducted a study that looked at faith development among adult Jews using semi-structured interviews.<sup>161</sup> This was a comparison study that worked with two groups each comprising 9 participants using a single extended interview with each. From these studies it was clear that depth of inquiry was possible even with a small sample size (indeed in Baker et al. a range of their respondents argue that in many studies a single interview can be valuable<sup>162</sup>).

My final consideration in determining a sample size was related to data handling. The data collection methods that I chose to use were intended to generate rich data. With the resource constraints of a single researcher there were limits on the number of participants that it was possible to work with, both in terms of establishing and maintaining researcher/participant relationships and also in terms of data handling at the analysis stage of the research. Taking all of these considerations into account I determined to recruit a sample of 10 participants.

### 3.2.3 Participant identification and recruitment

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<sup>160</sup> Divya Jindal-Snape and Elizabeth A. Holmes, 'A Longitudinal Study Exploring Perspectives of Participants Regarding Reflective Practice During Their Transition from Higher Education to Professional Practice', *Reflective Practice*, 10 (2009).

<sup>161</sup> Michael B. Herzbrun, 'Loss of Faith: A Qualitative Analysis of Jewish Nonbelievers', *Counseling and Values*, 43 (1999).

<sup>162</sup> Baker and Edwards, pp. 9, 23, 28, 33.

Having determined my participant characteristics and sample size, I was left with the task of finding and recruiting participants who met my inclusion criteria. My first decision concerned the setting in which I would identify my participants. I considered two approaches. The first was to find students in the university and church settings they were about to leave and follow them as they moved for employment. The second was to find graduates as they arrived at new churches. Whilst this approach could have been practically advantageous (I could have identified participants from a contained geographical area – e.g. churches in Manchester), it would not identify those who do not find their way into a church post-graduation (a group that I was especially interested in). It would also mean that I could not observe how participants engage in the process of finding a church and may mean that my participants would feel under pressure to continue attending a church they had not fully settled into even if they were not convinced it was the right place for them to be. I therefore decided to use the first approach and identify students who were about to graduate and move away from the churches they had been attending.

My next choice concerned the geographical location of the universities and churches from which I would recruit those students. Here I made the pragmatic decision to choose the towns and cities closest to where I was geographically located across which there were a number of Universities. I initially looked to seven universities across three different cities geographically close to where I was based.

Having identified the setting and geographical location from which I would recruit my participants, I set about identifying and approaching groups who could help me to find potential participants. I began by using internet searches to identify a number of churches in those locations that had key connections with students. In an attempt to gain access to these students I then approached the person I thought might be the significant gatekeeper. In some churches this was an ordained minister, in others it was a student worker. These approaches garnered varying responses. In some cases I received no reply. In other cases the gatekeeper communicated with students, but did not offer me direct contact.

In one case I received an invitation to attend an event that the church was hosting for final year students. I also attempted to make direct contact with student groups and communities within these churches via their dedicated Facebook groups. I had limited success with this approach since many groups were closed to non-members. Groups that were open resulted in no responses from group members. In addition to local churches I also approached the Chaplaincies at my chosen universities. Again this produced a mixed response. Two universities were 'in between' chaplains resulting in no invitation to meet with anyone at those locations. One chaplaincy initially invited me to attend a student group, but then offered me the contact details of students who met my inclusion criteria who I contacted directly. The difficulty which I experienced in identifying and recruiting participants via chaplaincies was not altogether surprising. Chaplains often have extensive contact with a relatively small number of students who are linked to chaplaincy communities and activities, but there are many more students who are active in local churches but do not have any contact with their university chaplain.

The mixed strategy of approaching churches and chaplaincies enabled me to identify individual students who matched my criteria. I approached them individually, either at the events I had been invited to, or using contact details provided by chaplains and ministers. Having made contact with students, I explained the research to them and offered participant information sheets that gave full details of the research and what they would be asked to do if they agreed to take part.

My initial contacts also resulted in some snowballing with students introducing me to others who were interested in the research. Using this combination of approaches I eventually recruited 10 participants to the study. Details about the participants' course of study, church attendance whilst at university and the activities they were involved in are given in Table 1 below.

<b>Name</b>	<b>Course studied</b>	<b>Church attended</b>	<b>Church activities</b>
Lou	Primary Education	Anglican church plant	24/7 prayer Overseas mission trip
Pippa	Theatre and Performance	Anglican fresh expression	Leading worship SCM
Rory	Broadcast Media Production	Baptist church	Worship band Sound technician Youth work
Helen	Politics	Anglican parish church	Youth work Student group
Oliver	Social Policy	Independent Evangelical charismatic	Homeless outreach project
William	English Literature and History	Independent evangelical church	Worship group Home group Community projects
Mark	Environmental Science	Anglican Parish church	Choir Drama group
Henry	English Literature	Anglican fresh expression	Project supporting individuals with mental health problems
Emily	Primary Education	Anglican church plant	Community project Home group
Amanda	History	Anglican parish church	Student group Confirmation group

Table 1. Participant details table

### 3.3 Ethical Considerations

Within any research there are always a range of ethical issues that need to be considered. Holland et al. discuss a number of ethical issues that are of particular concern within qualitative longitudinal research.<sup>163</sup> Of those that they identify, two – confidentiality and privacy – were particularly pertinent to this study (others that they identify were of less concern given the limited time frame of the study and the lack of an extensive team of researchers being involved). My chosen data collection method for phase 2 of the research (online journals) further increased the importance of these two issues.<sup>164</sup>

#### 3.3.1 Confidentiality

The first ethical issue in relation to my research concerned confidentiality and the need to protect participant identities. Within a longitudinal study this is particularly significant as the data collected about any one participant becomes increasingly unique over time. At the outset of the research participants had much in common, indeed they were selected for their initial similarities. As the study progressed they became increasingly differentiated from each other. This meant that the data almost offered a fingerprint for each participant that meant their identity could be easily derived.<sup>165</sup> I therefore needed to take care to ensure that each participant's data was fully anonymised so as to ensure that individuals were not identifiable.

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<sup>163</sup> Janet Holland, Rachel Thomson, and Sheila Henderson, 'Qualitative Longitudinal Research: A Discussion Paper', (London: London South Bank University, 2006).

<sup>164</sup> Rebecca Eynon, Jenny Fry, and Ralph Schroeder, 'The Ethics of Internet Research', in *The Sage Handbook of Online Research Methods*, ed. by Nigel Fielding, Raymond M. Lee, and Grant Blank (London: Sage, 2008), pp. 23-41.

<sup>165</sup> Holland, Thomson, and Henderson, p.27.



### **3.3.2 Privacy**

The second ethical issue was privacy, which refers to the potentially intrusive and distorting nature of the research. Participants were being asked to take part in research which would involve them recording their significant encounters with church communities over a period of time. Depending on the method chosen, this could become intrusive. I dealt with this issue by offering online journals which would allow participants to set their own frequency of journaling and would be less intrusive than other potential approaches, for example monthly interviews. Participants were given a degree of autonomy in the writing of their blogs. The software platform chosen allowed me to see when participants had written new blogs and if necessary offer comments. The blogs were individually password protected to ensure that only the participants and I had access to their blogs.

### **3.3.3 Ethical Approval**

Before I embarked upon any of the fieldwork I sought ethical approval from Durham University's Theology and Religion Research Ethics committee. As part of this process a participant information sheet was prepared. This outlined the nature of the study, what participants were being asked to do, and discussed how issues of confidentiality and privacy would be handled in the research. This was given to all potential participants prior to their commitment to be involved in the research. At the point of recruitment into the research all participants completed a form to signal their informed consent to take part in the study.

## **3.4 Data Collection**

I undertook data collection in three separate phases, each with a distinct aim. The first phase is concerned with developing an understanding about how each of the participants had belonged to a church community while they were at university. This employed a semi-structured interview approach and was undertaken during the participants' last term at university. The second phase looks at how, after graduation, they identify a new church and then move to

belonging within that. This phase was longitudinal with participants asked to keep online journals recording their experiences. The third phase looks at the participants' reflections upon their experience and the sense making they have engaged in through that process. This again used semi-structured interviews. For the latter two phases data were collected over a period of two years (starting at the point participants left university). I selected this timeframe to allow sufficient time and depth for observation, particularly given the turbulent nature of post-university life and uncertainty for those entering employment (many new graduate jobs are for initial twelve-month contracts).

### **3.4.1 Phase 1 – Previous experiences of belonging**

My research question required that those who are part of the study belonged to a church community while they were students at university. I recognised that the way in which participants had belonged to churches previously may influence the way in which they seek to belong in the future and that having an understanding of their previous experiences and attitudes may offer useful insights when examining the longitudinal data about participants' experiences post-university. Before beginning on the longitudinal aspect of the research I therefore decided to explore how each of the participants had belonged to churches in the past. In order to do this I chose to use one to one interviews. This offered the potential to explore issues related to their previous experiences of belonging in depth and to do so at a fixed point in time. The time I chose was just before they were leaving University and the Church community they had been part of.

#### **3.4.1.1 Depth interviewing**

Having decided to use interviews there was a further decision to be made as to the way in which the interview was to be conducted. This decision was one that was driven by the nature of the enquiry and to a certain extent my chosen methodological framework. The nature of my study is qualitative. Jones says that 'qualitative research methodologies seek to learn about the social world in

ways which do not rigidly structure the direction of enquiry and learning within simplifying, acontextual, a priori definitions.<sup>166</sup>

In exploring issues of what it means to belong and the process by which someone moves into belonging it was important to be open to discovering from the participants what was of importance to them and to do so at depth. I wanted to discover the participants' perspective rather than impose upon them my own assumptions, as Chirban puts it to discover the 'inner view'.<sup>167</sup> To do so meant taking an approach that opened out discussion in directions that the participant wished to go rather imposing too rigid a structure upon them. As Jones notes

[...] structured interviewers have already predicted [...] what is relevant and meaningful to their respondents about the research topic; and in doing this they have significantly pre-structured the direction of enquiry within their own frame of reference in ways that give little time and space for their respondents to elaborate their own.<sup>168</sup>

Taking a semi-structured approach offered the opportunity to develop questions ahead of interviews which would allow me to collect data focused around similar topics. At the same time it also offered the opportunity to explore participants' experience at depth.

The use of interviews can inevitably raise concerns about interviewer bias. The way that an interviewer asks a question may change the response that is obtained meaning that the interview could not be repeated in such a way as to

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<sup>166</sup> Sue Jones, 'Depth Interviewing', in *Applied Qualitative Research*, ed. by Robert Walker (Aldershot: Gower Publishing, 1985), pp. 45-55, p.46.

<sup>167</sup> John T. Chirban, *Interviewing in Depth: The Interactive-Relational Approach*, (London: Sage Publications, 1996), p.xi.

<sup>168</sup> Jones, p.46.

get exactly the same responses from the participant. These concerns derive from concerns about reliability and replication which are driven by a positivist perspective. Choosing to use an interview as a tool for data gathering offers a flexibility to pursue broad themes and lines of investigation, something which is important to the realist perspective of my research as it recognizes the changing nature of the experience of individual participants. As Jones says

An interview is a complicated, shifting social process occurring between two individual human beings, which can never be exactly replicated. We cannot get at some 'objective truth' that would be there if only the effects of interpersonal interaction could be removed.<sup>169</sup>

For each participant the context in which they answer the questions in an interview schedule will differ. This means that the interview needs to allow for exploration and discussion of their individual situation in order to gain a full understanding of the processes they are involved in and the influences on those processes.

#### ***3.4.1.2 Developing the interview schedule – pilot interviews***

Having decided to use a semi-structured approach to the interviews, I needed to develop a topic guide to ensure that I explored the same areas for each participant.

To develop this topic guide I undertook an iterative process using a series of pilot interviews with 3 post-graduate students who had moved from a different university or recent graduates who were now in employment. My literature review presented three differing perspectives (sociological, consumerist and theological) from which the landscape of belonging can be explored. I drew on these perspectives and the insights from my review to develop an initial set of interview topic areas and formulate a series of questions. After each interview I made a full transcription and examined the questions that had been asked and

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<sup>169</sup> Ibid, p.48.

the answers that these had elicited. I then made adjustment to the questions to try to create an open topic framework that would elicit responses that offered as much depth as possible.

The pilot interviews all began with a question 'which church did you belong to while you were at university?'. I expected that this somewhat closed question would lead to participants naming a single church that they attended, but quickly found that it did not. I therefore added a follow on question about 'what did you enjoy about 'St. XX'?' which would allow for greater depth of response and enable participants to distinguish between their various experiences of belonging. In each of the pilot interviews this led to descriptions of some of the features of the church, for example time of service, who else attended, or the style of worship. Given that I was particularly interested in understanding the process of becoming someone who belongs the pilot interviews also included the question 'how did you find that church?' This also produced rich narrative descriptions. My experience of posing these three simple questions across the pilot interviews showed that the way in which the participant engages with the question cannot be contained. These questions, therefore, seemed to offer a means of eliciting rich data about participants' previous experiences of church belonging.

My literature review (chapter 2) shows that church belonging is in many ways determined by the individual. This meant that identifying when and how someone considered that they belonged would be an important aspect of these interviews. I decided to ask participants about how they knew that they belonged to previous churches. In line with a semi-structured, depth interviewing approach, I did not ask this question in such a direct way but instead approached the subject in slightly different ways for each participant. For example in the pilot interviews I asked:

When you were at your previous church and looked in the big book and ended up at [church name] and there were things you didn't like, but there was obviously something there that kept you coming back. Can you identify what that was?

What made you go back to that church after your first week, because you said you went to a couple of places and they were all right, but you didn't bother going back. What was it about the place you settled that meant you did go back?

These very different styles of asking the questions both opened up discussion about how the participants had moved from being a first time visitor to feeling that they actually belonged to a community. As I was piloting the topic guide these differences in how I posed questions underlined the difference between structured and semi-structured interviewing. Using a semi-structured approach required that I had the topic clearly defined, but allowed the exact form of questions to be determined by the flow of each individual interview.

#### **3.4.1.3 Initial interviews**

I conducted 10 initial interviews, all of which were timed to take place as the students completed their university degrees and before they moved to new locations. Each of the interviews took place at a time and location chosen by the participant. For some this was on their university campus, while others were conducted in coffee shops in central locations. All the interviews were audio recorded and fully transcribed. The interview topic guide can be found in appendix 1.

#### **3.4.2 Phase 2 – Journeys to new places of belonging**

My experience as a chaplain and my exploration of the literature on church belonging led me to view church belonging as a process which takes place over time. Even where an individual decides to attend the church at the end of their road and then continues to attend that church regularly they will still be involved in an active process as they move from being a first time visitor to a regular member of the community of faith in that place. I wanted to discover how this process unfolded for each of my participants and how they made the journey to new places of belonging after leaving university. This led me towards a method that would enable me to explore their experiences of attending new churches and belonging in new church communities both across time and in real time.

#### **3.4.2.1 *Choosing a research tool***

I considered a range of possible methods for examining the process across time. The first was the use of a series of interviews at regular intervals. This would have provided a means of examining the experience and choices of participants over time but could risk over burdening them at a time where much in their lives was likely to be turbulent and fast-moving. This turbulence also meant that in the periods between interviews much may happen to my participants in terms of their journeys towards belonging. Although the interviews might capture this, much of it was likely to be forgotten and/or re-interpreted in the light of more recent experiences. Whilst I recognised that any attempt to record the experience of an individual will always include some degree of interpretation I nonetheless wanted to increase the chance that I was capturing accounts of events rather than a reflection upon it.

The second method I considered was regularly observing my participants at their new churches. I ruled this option out for three reasons. First, it would be extremely difficult in practical terms for me to visit multiple participants who, after their initial interviews, could have moved anywhere in the country or beyond. Second, my presence would potentially change the nature of their interactions in their new church community. Third, observing someone in a worship setting potentially was unlikely to reveal anything about the choices that they made to get to being at that church.

The third method I considered was self-recording by participants. Inviting participants to keep some form of journal both limits the impact of the researcher and at the same time allows for data to be collected close to events. Journaling also potentially provides a window into participants' sense making processes, since it allows participants to record both their activities and their reactions to them. I also reasoned that a journaling approach would enable my participants to record what they considered significant and to do so at a frequency that was relevant and suitable for them. For these reasons I decided to use participant journaling (which has been used in a variety of research

contexts including education and nursing<sup>170 171 172</sup>) as a longitudinal data collection tool.

### **3.4.2.2 Creating blog spaces**

Previous research has used a range of journal keeping methods (for example paper note books,<sup>173</sup> sound recordings,<sup>174</sup> or video diaries<sup>175</sup>). Each of these methods has potential advantages and disadvantages variously promising participant empowerment and immediacy of data recording, but also raising issues of the comfort of participants in using any given method and the authenticity of the data created.<sup>176</sup> I considered these and decided that the use of web based journals ('blogs') offered many of the possibilities of each of the other methods. For the participants I hoped that blogs offered a flexible form of

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<sup>170</sup> Catherine Jenkins, 'Authenticity through Reflexivity: Connecting Teaching Philosophy and Practice', *Australian Journal of Adult Learning*, 51 (2011).

<sup>171</sup> Brenda Hayman, Lesley Wilkes, and Debra Jackson, 'Journaling: Identification of Challenges and Reflection on Strategies', *Nurse Researcher*, 19 (2012).

<sup>172</sup> Brenda Hayman and others, 'Marginalised Mothers: Lesbian Women Negotiating Heteronormative Healthcare Services', *Contemporary Nurse*, 44 (2013).

<sup>173</sup> Brent D Wolfe and Gregor Kay, 'Perceived Impact of an Outdoor Orientation Program for First-Year University Students', *Journal of Experiential Education*, 34 (2011).

<sup>174</sup> Barbara E. Gibson and others, 'The Integrated Use of Audio Diaries, Photography, and Interviews in Research with Disabled Young Men', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 12 (2013).

<sup>175</sup> P. O'Toole, 'Capturing Undergraduate Experience through Participant-Generated Video', *The Qualitative Report*, 18 (2013).

<sup>176</sup> R. L. Jones and others, 'The Promise and Problems of Video Diaries: Building on Current Research', *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 7 (2015).



journaling that enabled them to use a variety of types of media if they wished (text, links to websites, photos, sound recordings all being possible). From a researcher's perspective blogs also had the advantage of allowing me to see data as it was generated rather than waiting for a final journal.

After the initial interviews I asked all participants to keep an online journal or 'blog'. I asked them to focus on recording any encounters with church community from the point at which they left university.

To enable the online journaling I created an individual blog for each participant. The platform chosen was that offered by Wordpress.com. Although there are many possible blog platforms available I selected Wordpress.com because I had previous experience of using it and the range of features offered within the basic free platform were sufficient for the task at hand.

I set up each blog with password protection to make it viewable only by the participant and myself (although the participant could give viewing rights to others if they wished). Participants were able to customise their blogs in any way they wished (the web platform offered multiple options for customisation making it simple to change the visual appearance without affecting the functionality of the blog). As well as text entries it was possible for other materials to be added to the blogs, including photographs, video-clips, or sound recordings. To each blog I added an initial post that explained the use of the blog and demonstrated some of the basic functions. The page had suggestions of what sorts of things the participants might like to add:

This is a place where you can record any encounters you have with church. If you go to a service you might like to record what it was like, what happened, who you went with etc. You might also want to blog about how you felt about the service – was it like heaven or the other place? Did it connect to things happening in life? Was the after service coffee up to standard? Did anyone talk to you....?

You might also have other encounters with faith – things that get you thinking, stuff you read, conversations you have with friends, or

strangers. These might be things that encourage you with your faith or that challenge you.

An example of one of the blog pages can be seen in Figure 1 below.

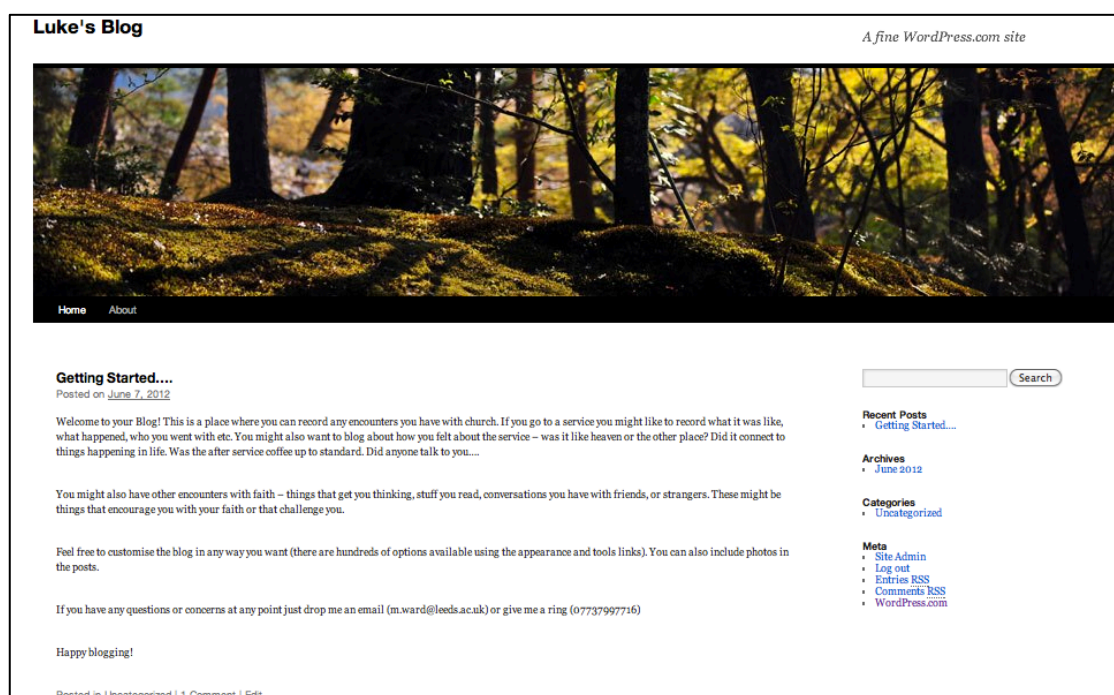


Figure 1. Sample blog page

The web platform also allowed comments to be added to entries that had been made. This feature meant that it was possible for me to ask questions to clarify things that were written in entries or to ask for further detail. It also offered a means of continuing my relationship with the participants by offering thanks and encouragement when I saw new entries appear.

Using an online journaling method meant that there was inevitably a great deal of variation in the material that was provided for a number of reasons. First, I chose not to impose a uniform structure for the blog posts, but instead allowed participants to blog in their own style, in an attempt to offer a sense of empowerment rather than constraint. The software platform allowed them to

use images, sound and video as well as text and some participants made use of this feature by including images within their posts whilst others did not. Second, I did not specify how much material or in what level of detail participants should record their encounters with faith communities meaning that some provided more detail and reflection than others (although this could reasonably be expected with other forms of qualitative data collection such as interviews). Third, I did not specify the frequency with which participants should add material, but instead allowed them to do this at a time and frequency that was relevant and manageable for them. Participants were instead encouraged to make entries when they had significant encounters with a faith community, meaning that some participants blogged far more frequently than others.

#### ***3.4.2.3 Additional data gathering - interviews***

Although online blogs offered a very rich means of data generation the variable frequency with which participants were making entries meant that I became concerned about whether online journaling alone would generate sufficient data (both in terms of quantity and depth) to enable me to answer my research questions. I therefore decided to conduct an additional interview during this phase of the research. These were conducted approximately half way through the data collection period.

As well as enabling me to generate more data, introducing an additional interview also enabled me to explore my participants' emerging experiences of belonging to new church communities (rather than just their experiences of attending new churches), and to determine whether any participants had withdrawn from the study rather than having simply stopped writing blog entries. This illustrates the iterative and reflexive nature of the research design.

I developed an interview topic guide (appendix 2) which would enable me to explore any contact that participants might have had with new churches and how they found those churches, and probe whether they had a sense of belonging to any of those church communities. Similarly to the initial interviews, I also drew on insights about belonging from my literature review work when

developing the topic guide. Given the importance of social capital in belonging, for instance, I included questions that examined the social context and relationships that participants were experiencing. To explore theological perspectives on belonging I included questions that explored the individual's faith and their perceptions of how that may have changed since leaving university.

### **3.4.3 Phase 3 – Reflections upon belonging**

At the end of the data collection period, approximately 2 years after the participants had left university, I conducted a final interview with them. The aim of this interview was to spend some time reflecting with participants on their experiences of engaging with new churches, how these had impacted upon them and whether and how they had developed a sense of belonging in those churches. The interview also offered an opportunity to draw my relationship with the participants to a close.

I developed an interview guide that focused on a number of areas. Initial questions focused on exploring the participants' recollections and reflections on the churches that they had been attending and their level of involvement with those churches over time. The other areas of questioning were derived from the insights into the process of belonging that I had gained from the data collected during the longitudinal phase of the research. These areas explored participants' understanding of belonging, the role of social capital in their experiences of belonging, and the relationship between their experiences of belonging and faith.

The key area of the research question is concerned with belonging. Whether participants had found new places to belong was really important, but as part of that I wanted to explore what they meant by belonging. The data collected across the research suggested that there were differences between attending and belonging. This area of discussion questioned whether they felt that they belonged somewhere. If they did belong I was particularly interested to explore

in more depth what made them feel that they belonged and how they knew that they had reached a point of belonging.

Issues relating to social capital were emerging from initial reading of the data that had been collected up to this point. I was interested to see whether belonging was something that was constructed around participants' social networks. For those whose experiences of belonging were expressed in social terms I wanted to probe whether church offered a place in which the distinction between the bonding and bridging ideas of capital was eroded.

Data from the initial interviews, the blog material and the additional interviews suggested that my participants developed personal sets of criteria that they used to assess whether they wanted to try any particular church, for example did the church offer a style of worship that they were looking for. I was interested to see what the importance of faith was within these criteria, or whether other considerations dominated. I was also interested to see whether their perceptions or expression of faith had changed over the period of study and if it had, what impact that made on their searching or belonging. For those who had not connected to new places of belonging I also wanted to see what impact that had had on their faith and how they were able to keep their faith alive outside of a church community. The interview topic guide can be seen in appendix 3.

The final interviews were again conducted as face-to-face interviews where possible. As with the mid-point interviews it was not possible to conduct three of them face to face because of the location of participants and these were again conducted using Skype video calls. Again, all interviews were audio recorded. These recordings were then transcribed and anonymised. Once they had been transcribed all audio recordings made during the three phases of data collection were destroyed to protect participants' privacy.

## 3.5 Data Analysis

### 3.5.1 Familiarisation

As with any qualitative study data analysis began with becoming thoroughly familiar with the entirety of the data.<sup>177</sup> This process began early in the research as I transcribed the various interviews (which required careful and often repeated listening) and read the blog material in preparation for subsequent interviews. By the end of the study I had undertaken multiple readings of both the transcribed data and the material generated by the participant blogs.

### 3.5.2 Thematic analysis

I continued the analytical process using a thematic analysis approach. In essence thematic analysis is 'a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data'<sup>178</sup> and is often used to produce rich descriptive accounts of an entire dataset. I reasoned that this approach would enable me to understand and represent the key aspects of participants' experiences that related to my questions about church belonging. I decided to treat all data as equivalent at this stage of the analysis (losing its longitudinal aspect) since I was more interested in gaining an overview of my participants' experiences rather than describing those experiences over time. I had also come to realise that events did not happen in a uniform manner for each participant and they did not all look for new churches, try different options, or become more involved at the same pace. Some went through several iterations of the process as they moved location more than once, some quickly linked to churches they already

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<sup>177</sup> Liz Spencer and others, 'Analysis: Principles and Processes', in *Qualitative Research Practice: A Guide for Social Science Students & Researchers*, ed. by Jane Ritchie and Jane Lewis (London: Sage, 2014), pp. 269-94.

<sup>178</sup> Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, 'Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology', *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3 (2006).

knew and still others spent the entire period of the study looking at different churches. This meant that separating their data into different time points was less useful than considering it as a whole. I did, however, preserve the temporal nature of the material by using different colours for material collected at different time points across the research.

To facilitate the thematic analysis I imported all data (transcribed interview material and participant generated data), into the software package NVIVO for coding. Working initially from a single transcript, I created a series of codes each of which represented a simple and discrete area of discussion that was of interest in terms of my research question (for example 'name of a church attended' or 'how church was found'). I coded the remaining material using an iterative process that involved applying codes I had already generated and generating additional codes as necessary. By working back and forth through the material I eventually developed an initial set of codes to which all relevant data was coded. When this process was complete I reviewed and compared the codes I had generated and grouped these into a smaller number of themes.<sup>179</sup> These themes represent similarities and patterns in the data<sup>180</sup> which relate to participants' experiences of finding a new church to belong to. I further grouped the themes into a smaller number of categories which described the types of experiences which the themes related to (i.e. searching for a church, attending church, belonging to church). I then collated all data into those themes and categories. This enabled me to identify and produce a descriptive account of the general patterns in participants' experiences. The results of the thematic analysis are shown in Chapter 4.2 - 4.4.

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<sup>179</sup> Ibid.

<sup>180</sup> Melanie Birks and Jane Mills, *Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide*, 2nd edn (London: Sage, 2015), p.89.

### 3.5.4 Framework analysis

Having completed the thematic analysis of the material I embarked upon a framework analysis. This approach, developed by Ritchie and Spencer,<sup>181</sup> focuses on summarising and synthesising data to enable comparisons to be made across the whole dataset – both at the level of individual participants and analytical themes. The method begins with the creation of a matrix with cases (individual participants) along one axis and data codes along the other. In this case the ‘data codes’ axis comprised the themes from the thematic analysis. The matrix is populated with all the data that has been coded at the intersection of the two axes. The data is then reduced using a process of summarizing and synthesizing. This results in the production of short summaries that include the key points within each cell of the matrix. Throughout the process the link to the original data is maintained. The use of a framework analysis offers both a thorough and systematic approach. It is thorough in that each piece of coded data is considered individually. It is systematic as each code is dealt with discretely with the material it contains being reduced to its essence, without any of the original material being lost. This approach offered me a way of directly comparing the experiences of all participants in order to identify the common stages that participants went through during their journeys towards belonging in a new church community.

As with the thematic analysis I took the decision to include all of the material I had collected from each participant in the framework, rather than creating separate matrices for each data source (i.e. initial interviews, blog material, additional interviews, final interviews). I reasoned that accumulating all the material in this way would enable me to build an holistic picture of each participant’s experiences of belonging over time.

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<sup>181</sup> Jane Ritchie, Liz Spencer, and William O'Connor, 'Carrying out Qualitative Analysis', in *Qualitative Research Practice: A Guide for Social Science Students and Researchers*, ed. by Jane Ritchie and Jane Lewis (London: Sage, 2003), pp. 219-62.



Table 1 below shows the structure of the framework matrix that I produced. This enabled me to read all of the coded material for individual participants (gaining a sense of their individual biography of belonging) or to look at material related to particular codes and concepts across all the participants.

	Searching Categories				Attending Categories				Belonging Categories			
	S1	S2	S3	S4	A1	A2	A3	A4	B1	B2	B3	B4
Participant 1												
Participant 2												
↓												
Participant 8												

Table 2. Framework analysis table

The output of the framework analysis is a conceptual model which shows the different phases participants went through during their journeys towards belonging and how these phases connect to each other.

The results of the framework analysis and the conceptual model are shown in Chapter 4.5.

Having created the conceptual model I then returned to the data for each of the participants and presented their story using the model. These stories form the basis of Chapter 5 and demonstrate how the model plays out in individual biographies.

## **4 Experiences of seeking and belonging**

In this chapter I present the results of the thematic and framework analysis and build a picture of participants' experiences of seeking and belonging to new church communities.

The thematic analysis identified 29 different codes which I used to develop 11 distinct themes about participants' experiences of belonging. I grouped these into 3 categories representing different types of experiences (appendix 4). The results of the thematic analysis can be found in sections 4.2 – 4.4 of this chapter.

The framework analysis offered a comparison across the participants of the experiences described in the thematic analysis. Through this I identified common stages which participants went through in the process towards belonging. These are presented in the form of a model. The results of the framework analysis can be found in section 4.5.

Before I present the results of the analyses I first introduce the participants, each of whom has been assigned a pseudonym.

### **4.1 Introducing the participants**

At the start of the research I recruited ten participants. Eight completed the full two years of the study with two withdrawing fairly near the start. As has already been discussed all of the participants were drawn from universities in two northern cities. At the point at which they were recruited they were all about to complete degrees with the expectation that they would be leaving university and seeking employment.

As they left, university life for all of the participants was best characterised as changing. Economic pressures of the time (2012-14) meant that graduate jobs were harder to find and many of these were relatively short-term. Many of the jobs that participants ended up doing had unpredictable working patterns. Alongside the lack of long-term work stability there was also a lack of geographical stability as participants moved to find work (or to have the support of family while out of work). Housing for those who had relocated was often in shared houses with frequently changing housemates. Those who had relationships found that they were living at a distance from their partners, which added a further demand upon their time. It also meant that planning for the future was difficult as partners were also often looking for work within an unstable environment.

Lou took an 'intern' year when she left university which she enjoyed. Through the activity she was involved in during her internship Lou realised that she wanted to pursue a career in teaching and so applied for and took up a PGCE place when she finished the internship. Lou had a boyfriend who lived in a different city to her and she tried to visit him regularly.

Pippa and Rory also took intern years when they left university but their experiences were not as positive as Lou's. Both experienced difficulties because of isolation, mismatches of expectations and heavy demands made upon them. Rory left his intern role after a couple of months and returned to live with his parents who lived in a relatively isolated location. He eventually moved back to his university city to look for work, and lived with a succession of friends as he did so. Pippa almost completed her year but suffered considerable stress over the latter months. Her job often required that she visited different cities and frequently this was at weekends. She also had a boyfriend who lived elsewhere. After her internship year she too returned to her university city with her boyfriend where they lived with friends and took temporary work while seeking more permanent employment. Even living with her boyfriend did not bring

stability. She said 'it still seems to be that weekends I'm disappearing here there and everywhere, but for different reasons. That's just life'.

Helen gained a place on a graduate training scheme with a local authority when she left university. This required her to relocate to a new city. In addition to this she also moved around different departments (often located in different parts of the city) within the organisation meaning that she had few ongoing colleagues at work. Her boyfriend lived in a different city and she split her weekends between the two locations. The pressures led her to say 'there is an element that on Sunday I'm struggling to get [to church] as I'm so busy on the weekend.'

Oliver went to Germany. He worked in two short-term jobs in different locations before deciding to continue with education. This led to a more settled period, however he still did not have a sense of being settled saying 'the problem is that I'm always moving to different places'.

William worked for a Christian charity and was able to base himself at home (partly a pragmatic choice, and partly because family circumstances meant his being at home was helpful for others). His job required him to visit churches across the country that supported the charity he worked for. These visits were often at weekends. In addition to this he had a girlfriend who lived at a distance to him. Although William was relatively stable in terms of home his girlfriend moved several times over the two years of the study which affected William's sense of stability.

Mark managed to secure a permanent job that linked to the degree he had studied. At the point I recruited him to the study he intended to leave his university city to look for work. His new job meant that he was able to remain in his university city and at the church he had attended while a student. At times, however, his job required working unsociable hours and often at remote locations.

When he finished his degree Henry decided that he wanted to do a PhD and returned to live at home while he sought a place and funding to do this. He did not have regular employment but picked up occasional casual work. He experienced a sense of isolation because of his location and lack of work.

## **4.2 Searching for a church: experiences of seeking a new place to belong**

### **4.2.1 The Marketplace**

Arriving in a new and unfamiliar town it can be a joy to wander around the local market, taking in the sights, smells and sounds of the variety of goods on offer. Potential customers can be seen looking at the various stalls, trying to find the one with the things they are looking for, comparing the quality or price or the novelty of the goods. Along with the goods come enthusiastic stallholders trying to persuade the browsers to become purchasers.

Many of the participants spoke about experiencing something similar to this when they first arrived at university and were seeking a new church. Local churches, student groups and university chaplaincies all seemed to contribute to the creation of a sense of church marketplace for new students, actively encouraging them to try a range of different churches. William, for instance, talked about a 'church fair' organized by a Christian Union with a 'church crawl' to visit churches on subsequent weeks. Expectations from and amongst friends also served to reinforce the sense of a church marketplace. For example Lou talked about getting to know a group of people with whom she went church hunting trying 5 or 6 churches over a number of weeks. Pippa also talked about visiting at least one church with friends who had engaged in a 'church crawl'. Oliver spoke of 'a short meeting at Christian Union where different churches presented themselves.'

Helen and Henry were both aware of the church marketplace when they arrived as students, but missed the narrow window in which organized church fairs or 'church crawls' were on offer. As a result they engaged with a much broader marketplace than that which was on offer in the first few weeks of term, and used web searches to 'shop around' for potential places to try.

Mark's church marketplace was based on local proximity and denomination. His first week at university he tried a church that was near to his accommodation, choosing this because 'it looked Anglican'. When he realized that it was not he tried another church.

Having experienced an approach to finding a church which was dominated by a sense of marketplace, participants' subsequent attempts to find a church post-university were also dominated by the same expectations. Helen, for example, said that arriving in a new place 'I look for things on the church website'. However, post-university a church market place is not so clearly present. Churches did not consciously behave as if they were part of a market. Helen continued

If you're new to an area you're not going to know where the actual church is, so you do a quick Google search and bring up 10 churches and you want to find, what time, where they are and how to get there and if that information isn't there that's difficult.

#### **4.2.2 Selection criteria**

Mark's approach to finding a church when he arrived at university showed that he had a clear sense of what he was looking for, akin to a set of selection criteria. For him this was rooted in a particular sense of brand ('it looked Anglican'), but also included other criteria which related to what he thought that brand should offer (he was disappointed that the church he settled in did not use incense). When he visited a church that he thought looked Anglican on the outside he enjoyed some of the difference he encountered but ultimately it did not meet the criteria he had set and so he moved on.

Mark was not alone in having a set of criteria that he used in making decisions about church belonging. Post-university these criteria became more knowing. When discussing their experiences of looking for a new church having left university both Pippa and Oliver presented very clear lists of criteria that were sophisticated, and well considered. Pippa, in her blog presented a list entitled 'My ideal church criteria'. She went on to list 5 key areas for consideration (denomination, how active it is, serious learning, really singing, inclusive). In an interview Oliver reflected upon what he called his 'identification process' which he told me included 'what kind of theology I prefer, why I need to be critical towards my faith, why I think being part of that church is helpful and how involved I want to be'. In effect they both seemed to have developed their own criteria against which they would be able to judge any church.

It was not clear whether there was any sense of priority or weighting to the criteria they had developed. Oliver, however, did write in his blog about what he called tangible and intangible criteria:

[...] there are tangible things like a non-fundamentalist way of reading the Bible, an openness towards a creative discussion of Biblical texts, a focus on today's people, on their needs rather than holding onto fixed dogmas, a readiness to admit errors and misapprehensions [...] there are other factors that are less objectively observable such as the general way people treat each other in church and how they deal with conflicts. This something you rather sense than put on a scale from 1 to 100. It's also something that is very subjective.

Pippa explained that her 'template for the ideal church', was something that had developed in her head over her time at university. Being part of the research led her to writing it down in a more formal manner. Early into her blog she wrote:

I have definitely developed a template for the ideal church in my mind [...] I would quite like to document my template, if only so that I can ensure that I am judging every church with the same criteria!

For some participants their criteria were related to their expectations of the quality and type of teaching which a church should offer. This was especially the case for those participants who had a strong sense that church should be the primary place where Christian teaching was offered. For them finding the right place to get that teaching input was very important. As Oliver said,

The church service for me is mainly a place where I get input, it's really important that the sermons are quite good, that I can get some theology from the sermons. Ideally they should be intellectually and spiritually challenging. They should challenge me to understand but also challenge spiritually about the way I live my faith.

For some doctrine also formed part of the set of criteria that they used when looking for a new church. Participants talked about how publicity material, websites and other information offered them a range of clues about the theological, doctrinal and faith practices of any particular church. For example, Helen said that after looking at the website of a church she had considered trying she realised 'that's not what I'm looking for'. When Henry and I first met he talked about having previously been part of very conservative churches. He had actively sought out places that shared those perspectives. Over time he has moved significantly in his understanding and practice of his faith and talked about a range of other areas of change in his life that had profound impact upon him. Initially this meant that he struggled to find church communities to try but over the course of the research he spoke of his appreciation of ritual which led him to identify cathedral worship as somewhere to try. None of the participants appeared to use doctrine alone as their criteria for choosing a church to try, but instead it simply formed part of a broad set of criteria which they could use to distinguish between and filter the possibilities that were open to them.

Both Oliver and Pippa were realistic about the potential of all their criteria being met. Pippa before she laid out her criteria wrote 'I don't think that there is a church that will fulfil all the requirements' of the template. Oliver said 'I don't think there is a 'right' church for me'. Recognising that he did not think one church would meet all his needs he developed a network approach where he



looked for different elements that he saw as important to him in different places. One comment he made showed very clearly his sense of the church landscape. 'I get my faith bits from different parts of the religious market as I would say'.

#### **4.2.3 Discernment**

Explicitly seeking God's guidance through prayer when deciding which church to belong to was only specifically mentioned by William. 'I was thinking about it and praying about it a lot and, then for quite a few different reasons I decided it was right to stay put at my home church'. Although Oliver did not directly connect his search for church with prayer, he did talk about prayer being 'part of my everyday life'.

Whilst not talking about seeking God's guidance through prayer others did often speak of a sense of God's guidance when reflecting upon the church that they had become part of. Lou said 'I feel God has called me back home and put me in a place where there are specific things He is asking me to do'. Mark also talked of a having a sense of calling in terms of the church he was attended. During an interview, having listed a number of things that he did not like about the church he was attending, he said 'despite all that it was right to be there, and you still should be going... I guess that's a bit of a calling.' Rory, while struggling to find both a church to attend and employment, wrote in his blog 'God continues to try with me and I continue to look to Him for what He wants me to do next.' Henry, when reflecting on his recent experiences of life and faith wrote 'God has patterned [life] out for his children'.

#### **4.2.4 Brand loyalty**

The experiences of all participants suggest that they had a strong sense of 'brand loyalty' in a number of guises. Lou and Mark both settled very quickly into churches that they already knew. Lou returned to a church she had attended before university while Mark gained a graduate job in his university city and continued to attend the church he had been at as a student. William also returned to a home church. As well as talking about God's guidance in relation to that choice he also explained that he did not feel that he had the time to

commit properly to finding another church, saying ‘I haven’t looked at other churches because I was [saying to myself], “if I’m starting visiting others I’m doing a process that I’m going to follow through”’. Rory and Pippa also both eventually ended up back in their university cities and both connected back to the churches they had previously been part of. ‘Brand loyalty’ for all four of these participants came in the form of their continued commitment to a particular church.

When Helen arrived at university she made a clear choice that she wanted to take the opportunity to try a different brand (i.e. not catholic)

I went on the chaplaincy website, and looked at the different times to see what they suggested for different worship style, cause I was going to go round a lot of different denominations, cause I thought that would be the first opportunity by myself to do it.

After university, however, Helen’s search focused around brands she had previously experienced (Catholic or Church of England) and she eschewed looking at those that she had no experience of.

Oliver and Henry also made reference to brands in their searching for churches post-university. Oliver, for instance, used brands as a quick way of identifying whether churches might fit the criteria he had developed. He also showed brand awareness in his description of the style of a church he attended referencing churches such as the Australian based Hillsong and American Mars Hill. Henry’s sense of brand focused on the theological position of churches while he was at university. He talked about looking for key words in their description for example ‘Reformed’. His changing theological perspectives meant that post university he saw some brands as potentially unsuitable, being cautious about a friends invitation to attend a Pentecostal church. As such he used brand labels as a way of identifying those churches that might be suitable and those with which he felt the need to exercise a degree of caution. Towards the end of the study, as he prepared to move to take up a PhD place in a new city Henry said he had found a café church via a web search. This was a ‘brand’ that he had

previously experienced and suggested to him that this might be a place he would connect with. His sense of brand familiarity meant that he was intending to try the café church when he arrived in his new city.

#### **4.2.5 Recommendations**

Consumers looking to buy a new product place importance on recommendations. This can come either as a personal recommendation from a friend or acquaintance, or from product reviews offered by others. In part the 'market place' or 'fair' events offered participants this type of recommendation when they were seeking a new church when they arrived at university. William noted that there were 'church reps' who would take you to their church. These 'reps' were students, people similar to those they were inviting to attend with them.

Recommendations were important post university too. Helen, for instance, readily attended a church when she was invited by her boyfriend's housemate whilst Rory tried the church that his landlords attended. Pippa said 'everyone I spoke to recommended [the same] Methodist Church'.

As well as these direct recommendations by people with experience of a particular church, some participants spoke about receiving indirect recommendations. Helen said 'I've had conversations with people and people have suggested places ... but these are suggestion from other people.' These indirect recommendations were based around the recommender's local knowledge or the reputation of a particular church. It is akin to someone saying 'I've heard that The Golden Swan is a great restaurant, you should try it' when they have neither visited the restaurant or, as far as you are aware, have any real interest in restaurants.

#### **4.2.6 Connections and relationships**

Participants' connections and relationships had an important bearing on their experiences of seeking a new church to belong to.

Family histories and relationships were important for some. Before arriving at university Pippa, for instance, had gone to a Methodist church that her grandmother attended. Although she described this as a relatively pragmatic choice ('my Grandma attends that [Methodist] church, so when I turned round to my parents and said I wanted to go to church, and I was already with the Brownies at that church, we'd go with them') she also talked about becoming more conscious of being Methodist and how her family heritage had shaped her choice of church.

William also had a family history of attending church. This, coupled with his strong relationship with his parents led him to return to a church that he grew up in when he left university. 'I go to the Baptist Church, where I grew up. It's quite a large church, fairly charismatic. I know people there. My parents are a massive source of encouragement.' Lou also returned to a church that she had attended before university. Although she did not come from a Christian family, she had belonged to a youth group at the church that had been supportive when her mother had been very ill. Her connections and history with that church led to her almost viewing it as an extension of her family 'I grew up through that church and knew a lot of them.'

Henry's family history of attending church also influenced his search when he left university, but in a less positive way. Henry's father had been actively involved in a local church but left after a bad experience. For a large part of the first year after leaving University Henry found himself living at home and was wary about becoming involved with a local church. He did talk about other family connections which were likely to influence his future search for a church, explaining that his cousins were offering suggestions of churches he might try upon relocation to their city.

Connections and relationships with friends were also an important influence when participants were seeking a new church. Helen, for instance, found herself splitting her weekends between two different cities where she and her boyfriend lived when she left university. She struggled to find a church to attend when she

was on her own but when she was visiting her boyfriend she attended regularly. The impetus for this came through her partner's friends who were part of a church and invited Helen to go with them. When he was at university Rory found churches through friends and he repeated this pattern when he took up his internship. When he had moved back to live with his parents it was a friend who invited him to attend his church with him and when he returned to his university town existing friendships led him to return to his previous church.

Mark did not have family or friends who were attending church. His search was a lone venture and based on identifying a church that suited him stylistically. Once he had done this, however, he very quickly formed a friendship group at the church he had started attending, and these relationships were important to him in maintaining his attendance. 'People were very friendly [...] It was just exactly what I wanted. That's why I kept going back.'

### **4.3 Turning up: experiences of attending church**

#### **4.3.1 Welcome**

For all participants, the way in which they were welcomed by churches was important. Participants talked about welcome in a number of different ways, all of which showed that welcome meant something more than having a dedicated member of a welcome team at the entrance to a church and greeting people they do not recognise. Participants talked about welcome in terms of wanting to feel valued, finding hospitality, or someone paying serious attention to them. All in some way emphasised the importance of establishing personal relationships, suggesting that welcome was more than a point action occurring on the first visit to a church but rather something that extended over a period of time.

Participants talked of welcome in terms of the attitude of a church community. William spoke of his experience of the church he belonged to saying that 'the whole church takes it upon themselves to welcome people...we want to welcome you into our family and take a genuine interest in you.' For Mark this

attitude was found in a small number of people who consistently worked hard at welcoming people, rather than the whole church community.

I remember the first week I went there. There were one or two people I can pick out. I watch them now when new people came and now I think 'that was me and they made me welcome', and now they're doing it again.

This welcoming approach and the relationships that were established quickly led to Mark feeling that he was part of the community and that he belonged there. 'It's people who make you feel like you belong'.

For some participants their expectations and previous experiences of being made welcome at churches were not repeated when they left university. When I first met Helen she said 'I think that church people are the most welcoming people you could ever meet.' However, her experience of trying new churches when she left university did not deliver the same experience.

Apart from the hello on entering the church no one else really spoke to me. This in itself didn't make it uninviting [...] But it lacked the friendly and welcoming experience I had at my last church.

For Rory what was important was that people gave time to getting to know him as an individual and that they discovered what was important to him.

I guess in any situation, whether it's a job or church, it's that your opinions are valued. That people want you to be there, that you're not just left to be part of the furniture.

Having become established in a church Rory recognised that this type of welcome required something from both the church who were welcoming and the person who was being welcomed.

I guess it comes down to interaction. And I guess it works both ways. I say to people who dart off [as] soon as the service has finished, how do

you expect people to welcome you and involve you if you're not physically here?

For some welcome was about finding a degree of familiarity, or perhaps a sense of safety. This could be found in the style and content of the service, or in being given the tools to make it easy to navigate unfamiliar territory without feeling awkward. Often it was relatively small things that made this possible. Helen said 'They had their own order of service. It was well set out, you never felt you were going to say the wrong thing at the wrong time, which I quite liked.' That sense of worrying about fitting in was echoed by Henry, although his concerns were more around what someone might ask him. He said 'I was worried they'd be asking me all sorts of questions [...] I'm a bit tired, bit disillusioned about talking about things like that that are artificial.' Much as he and others were trying to discern whether they had a sense of fit with a new church there was also a sense that in being questioned by established church members (however informally) they were seeing whether the newcomer fitted in too.

For all participants the sense of welcome that they received when they attended a church was crucial in deciding whether to return another week and whether to become involved in the life of a church. As Helen said:

Apart from the hello upon entering the church no one else really spoke to me. This in itself didn't make it uninviting but I'm going to visit a few different churches and services, as it lacked the friendly and welcoming experience that I had at my last church.

For all participants welcome was a complex process. As Pippa wrote in her blog:

Welcome is on lots of different levels, it's where you feel comfortable, and it's where you take an active part in what's going on and when someone would notice if you weren't there, so someone would chase you up and find out if you were ok.

### 4.3.2 Time and space to attend

Once they had left university participants' lifestyle had a significant influence on their experiences of attending new churches. For many new work demands meant that their weekends were both pressured and precious with them talking about having to make conscious and difficult choices about attending church in any given week and weighing this up in relation to other competing demands. Helen said 'there is an element that on Sunday I'm struggling to get there as I'm so busy on the weekend' adding 'I've been in a relationship with someone for a year now and he lives in [another city].' Those demands frequently led to participants not attending church with any sense of a regular pattern. Pippa commented in her blog 'I've been unable to attend [church] because I have not been in [the city] for a single weekend. In fact I've been in a different city every weekend.' Some of the participants placed a high priority on attending church and so found this difficult, expressing frustration when the other demands on their time made it difficult to attend church. William noted 'I've made church a priority and have gone as often as I can, but because of the nature of things I've not been able to go every week and there's been quite a lot of gaps in my church attendance.' Others did not have such a sense of priority and were more relaxed about not attending. Oliver said 'I do not attend a service every Sunday but usually twice a month', later adding 'I try to get some kind of input once a week and then I choose whether I go to a service or watch something [online]'.

When participants were frequently away at weekends the sense of connection to a local area was stronger during the week, but this still presented challenges in terms of finding somewhere to attend. As Helen said, 'I've not seen anything in local churches that's "come over on a Thursday evening for this"'.

For some participants church attendance was part of their routine, meaning that they found time and space to attend regularly. William said 'The thing about church is that week by week it becomes a part of your lifestyle'. Routine attendance was also linked to a sense of habit, which friends and family helped participants to maintain. As Lou said,



I grew up in that church, became a Christian in that church youth group and therefore a lot of my friends at home are part of that youth group. So when we go home it's just part of our habit and culture to go to church on Sunday.

#### **4.4 Coming home: experiences of belonging to church**

Participants were able to make a distinction between attending church and belonging. Helen, for instance, talked about attending a church regularly when she visited her boyfriend. When she went to church she sat with friends, they introduced her to others who were there. Yet when I asked her whether she felt she belonged she said no. For my participants belonging means more than attending.

##### **4.4.1 Wanting to be needed**

When they were talking about their experiences in finding a new church to belong to a number of participants talked about wanting to feel that they were needed. When talking about the church he attended whilst a student William said 'What stuck out for me at [church] was that as a student it felt you were needed and wanted and valued [...] there was a real need for students'. Oliver said 'one explanation why I stayed for so long was that I felt that I was needed' whilst Mark said 'you felt without your input something wouldn't happen.' Mark's sense of being needed came from being invited to preach on environment Sunday and to develop a 'green team' as part of the EcoCongregation scheme, both of which were linked to his work in environmental survey.

Rory's desire to be needed almost led to a decision to leave the church he was currently attending. He described a point where he was invited to help another church produce a promotional video saying 'I considered moving to [the other church] as they wanted me to serve there' going on to describe it as a church that was 'very keen to grow new people and to give people new opportunities.' But close to that time he also received an invitation to be part of the leadership

team of a mission group at the church he was already attending. That sense of being needed encouraged him to stay put.

#### **4.4.2 The offer of community**

Participants placed a strong emphasis on community when talking about their sense of belonging as opposed to attending church. They expressed this frequently using words and phrases such as 'community', 'family community' and 'church family'. For many their sense of belonging came through building connections with people who were already part of a church community.

Ultimately these connections developed into friendships with them. William said 'I really enjoy the community element of it, the value of relationship, people coming up to you and talking to you and taking an interest in you.' Oliver recognised the friendships as the things that made him feel part of a church community. In a blog post he reflected on a previous experience saying 'I felt at home there because many of my friends were there'. Belonging to a church community offered participants a sense of ongoing relationship and connection beyond the Sunday service. Pippa talked excitedly about realising she had become part of the community after being greeted by people from church in the street.

Suddenly you have a group of people around you who are people who live in the area who'll smile and say hello to you on the street. That's what I've been missing.

For some the size of the church congregation was an important part of being able to develop relationships and a sense of community. Mark identified that 'it's people who make you feel like you belong' and identified a small number of relationships that were really supportive for him. Rory chose his church while at university partly because of the size, recognising that it was important for him to be able to get to know people well. Similarly Oliver recognised that the size of the congregation impacts upon his sense of whether it is possible to get to know people and through that come to a sense of belonging 'I think the problem is in general that 80 people, or 40, 50 people is too difficult to connect with for me.' William visited a church with his girlfriend and was overwhelmed by the number

of people and the limited physical space and talked of having a sense of not being able to get to know anyone because there were too many people.

Some participants talked of church as offering a place of support and encouragement. For some this was through the teaching that was offered in services. Lou said 'I've felt quite far away from God sometimes. I've gone back to church and instantly you're back in that...because I have a community of people who bring me close to God'. For others, like Pippa, it was the encouragement of talking with people. She said 'it's a really socially active church. Every elderly person I've chatted with has done something incredible with their life'. For Mark the support was much more practical with a couple from the church offering him a place to stay while he was between housing contracts.

As well as offering this type of practical support and encouragement church for some was a place that offered support and resourcing for mission. For some that meant mission activity that was connected to things that the church did. For example William said

Something my church are focusing on at the moment is how to do outreach and evangelism. About 18 months ago we opened a CAP centre in the church and have a CAP centre manager (Church Action on Poverty) and we've had CAP clients start to come along because of that. One became a Christian the other week, which was amazing. We run alpha courses, with other churches in that area. The church really got behind it.

For others that mission extended beyond the activities of the congregation. Lou, for example, belonged to a church community who regularly offered prayer and encouragement for her work with a charity which was not connected to the church.

For some participants their sense of community was connected to the extent to which they shared the worldviews of others. Pippa, for instance, considered her views to be divergent from the operant theology in some of the churches that

she attended. She talked about struggling to express her views and ideas to others because she lacked both the confidence and the appropriate language to do so. In our final interview she reflected on how her experience of working for a faith based organisation (which had challenged her enormously emotionally and spiritually) had affected this.

I had no interpretation of quite how difficult, difficult is the word, but more than that, sophisticated my view of the kingdom of God would have to be in order to deal with what I was encountering.

Oliver spoke of his concerns for social justice which he wanted to fulfil through his own exploration rather than the directing of others. At times this led to an uneasy relationship with church communities whose views he did not share.

I want to follow my own individual path, want to travel as a discoverer not as a package holiday tourist who is being shown around. Sometimes, I will appreciate that someone can tell me that he or she has already been to the same place and had this or that experience but, in the end, I want to wander around on my own guided by my thoughts and conscience.

Those who had not found belonging in a church community talked about feeling that they were missing something in life. During her intern year, when she was struggling to find somewhere to belong, Pippa said 'I'm really feeling the loss of a strong church community that I can call my own'. While Helen said 'Things like relationships, job security they play on your mind and I feel really lacking of support.' Rory, when he returned to live with his parents also struggled with lack of community and expressed disappointment that church did not offer him that. 'Since being home [...] I've had no contact from anyone, even my home church which is [small] people don't make much effort'.

#### **4.4.3 Getting involved**

For many participants the most important aspect in their sense of belonging was their ability to get involved with the life of that community.

For some involvement was something that they actively sought out. When she was first looking for a new church Pippa commented 'I was talking with someone at church [...] and I said I'd really like to get involved with the community.' She quickly found that this was something that did not happen at that church. Even though she attended as often as she could this sense of not being able to get involved led to her saying 'I wouldn't say that I've become part of that church'. Twelve months later, after she had relocated for a second time, Pippa connected with another new church. This time she directly approached the Methodist Superintendant of the new circuit she had moved to and enquired about which churches in the circuit might have been most suitable for her to attend and which offered opportunities to be involved.

Other participants became actively involved in the life of a church by being asked directly to do something by someone who had a leadership role in the church. When Lou was about to move back home the new minister at the church she used to attend got in touch with her to talk about how she might be involved when she returned to start work with a local Christian charity. She said 'when we chatted [the vicar] explained that he had heard about the work I was to be doing and that as a church family they'd like to support me in that'. She went on to say that he identified 'a need for more mentoring of the young women [...] it was something I've been passionate about for a while'. The minister had a clear sense of needs in the church and where Lou might be able to make a contribution based on her gifts. This invitation and her subsequent involvement resulted in her saying in her blog 'I felt so at home and alive'.

Invitations were not always as strategic as this, however, and participants instead talked about being invited to take part in activities by others who were already involved. William said

I was approached back in December of January time and asked to get involved in the children's work and at the same time was also asked by the worship leader if I'd get back involved in the worship ministry.

For some invitations arose out of conversations that made connections between the individual, their interests and activity that was taking place within the church. Mark, for instance, gradually shared with people that he had done some acting and was then invited to be part of a pantomime. And when he mentioned he had previously been a member of a church council he was invited to consider joining the PCC at his new church. His work in environmental surveying was also recognised and led to invitations to lead a programme of environmental work within the church he was attending.

For Helen the invitation did not seem to come. When asked if she had been invited to be involved in anything she said that she hadn't, but also admitted that she felt daunted by that prospect. She did, however, identify things she would like to be invited to be part of. Oliver also hadn't become involved in any new church communities. He said 'The thing is you need to get involved to get to know people. And you need to spend time, and you need to be committed'. When talking about previous experiences, however, it was clear that for him being involved was also an important part of belonging.

One explanation as to why I stayed for so long was that I felt I was needed, that there I could contribute something. I was not the passive recipient of some remote higher truths from some enlightened preachers but I could do something.

Overall, participants became involved in a wide range of activity much of which was beyond the Sunday service. Mark became involved in a range of activity including singing in a choir, acting in the church pantomime and serving on the Church council. William was part of the leadership of an 18-30s group as well as being in one of the church's music groups. Lou helped to set up a Bible study group for girls. Pippa became part of the leadership of a Girl's Brigade and started training as a local preacher. Rory turned down offers to be part of a music group but eventually became one of the leaders of a home group. At a church he was part of for a short while Oliver became part of a team planning weekends away for student groups.

## 4.5 A process towards belonging

The thematic analysis of the data revealed a number of overarching themes relating to participants' experiences of belonging. The framework analysis enabled comparison of those experiences across all the participants. This showed that there was not a single linear route which they took from searching to belonging. It was, however, possible to draw the themes together into a number of common stages which participants went through during their journeys.

The process by which individuals moved towards belonging has three key phases - discerning, attending and belonging. In many ways these present a simple and logical progression. When someone moves to a new location and wants to belong to a church they first have to start attending one. Before that can happen the individual needs to find a church to attend amongst the choices that are on offer. So there is a flow between the phases. However, participants' experiences showed that this is not always simple and that during each phase there are a number of things that can support or hinder their journey.

For someone to attend a church there is some form of discerning that takes place. This can be a more or less complex process. The choice of the term 'discerning' is deliberate as it allows for a wider view of the activity taking place than might be suggested by the word 'identify' or 'searching'. 'Discerning' brings with it ideas of selection, refinement and judgement that are beyond simple identification. At its simplest someone may identify a church by physically seeing it at the end of their road and then decide to attend the next time there is a service. This was Mark's approach when he first arrived at university. In a more complex form discerning uses a range of approaches to match criteria that the person has created with the range of possible churches that have been identified. All participants developed more or less complex selection criteria which led them to either attend a church which matched those criteria or identify

further candidate churches by extending their geographic search area, or considering churches of different denominations.

In addition to the self-discerning that takes place, an invitation to attend (from someone who is already attending or is considering attending that church) played a key role in the majority of participants' experiences of identifying which church to attend. Some did not appear to enter into any deliberative process around whether to attend but instead simply attended on the recommendation of (or to accompany) a friend. As such personal relationships and networks have an important role to play in the discernment process.

Having attended a church (once or even multiple times) some participants decided that the church they had attended did not offer them what they were seeking and did not match their selection criteria. At this point they begin the discerning process again. Some of them did not appear to enter into the re-identification process with as much commitment and enthusiasm as in their initial attempt. Instead they considered the re-identification process too difficult and therefore did not engage with at all. As Henry said:

I feel more and more antipathetic to church institutions, which seem to drown people in churchiness [...] I will certainly not be going back to my parish church, and I have no wish to go to any other.

Attending means simply that – a participant attended worship, and potentially other activities or events at a particular church. Attending may occur just once, or a number of times with some regularity. Throughout the attending phase participants continued to engage with the discerning process, working out whether this was somewhere they could eventually come to belong. As such attending could be considered as an information gathering exercise to inform the discerning process.

The framework analysis showed that for all participants there appeared to be a watershed between attending and belonging that is formed of welcome and invitation to contribute. When participants felt welcomed they usually continued



to attend churches but did not necessarily move to belonging. Henry, for instance, wanted to feel welcome but did not wish to belong to a church community. As a result he chose churches and services which would give him relative anonymity, such as a service of choral evensong. For others welcome gave them permission to begin negotiating the boundaries between stranger/visitor and acquaintance/friend and to begin a journey towards belonging. When he began his intern year Rory, for example, was welcomed and invited to a social event that allowed him to begin to get to know people in that church.

An invitation to contribute forms a particularly significant part of the watershed for those who moved from attending to belonging. For those who attend it appears to be the point that offers the permission to move from being an outsider to being someone who starts to be included in the community and ultimately become part of it. The invitation is not one to belong; rather it is an invitation to contribute to the activity of the community. William told me about being 'asked to get involved in the children's work' (something he declined) and Mark described a series of conversations that led to invitations to be involved with the church pantomime, the PCC, and the choir, and to lead a programme of environmental activities. All of these invitations were offered in response to people finding out about his previous experiences and interests.

The contribution which participants were able to make enabled them to fully participate in the life of the church community. Their participation included becoming involved in leading services, small groups or offering services to the wider community on behalf of the church. For all of those who were able to contribute in this way their participation moved beyond that of attending the Sunday service and joining in with the liturgy. Participants found that their participation led to being recognised, and more importantly being appreciated by others who are part of the church community. For all participants some form of recognition and appreciation were significant elements in the transition to belonging, or incorporation into the body of the church.

Belonging is more difficult to define than attendance. Participants talked about belonging in terms of being part of the community and of receiving support and encouragement from the community. Importantly, belonging is not wholly dependent upon a certain frequency of attendance. For some participants their lifestyle meant that attendance was not as frequent and regular as they would have liked it to be, yet they still had a sense of belonging to a variety of church communities (including those they attended before and during their university years). For all of them their sense of belonging was strongly related to receiving support and encouragement from a community.

Figure 2 below presents a graphical model of the process towards belonging. It shows how the different phases of the process connect, demonstrates the different points of entry into the process and illustrates the points at which the process can be exited or repeated.

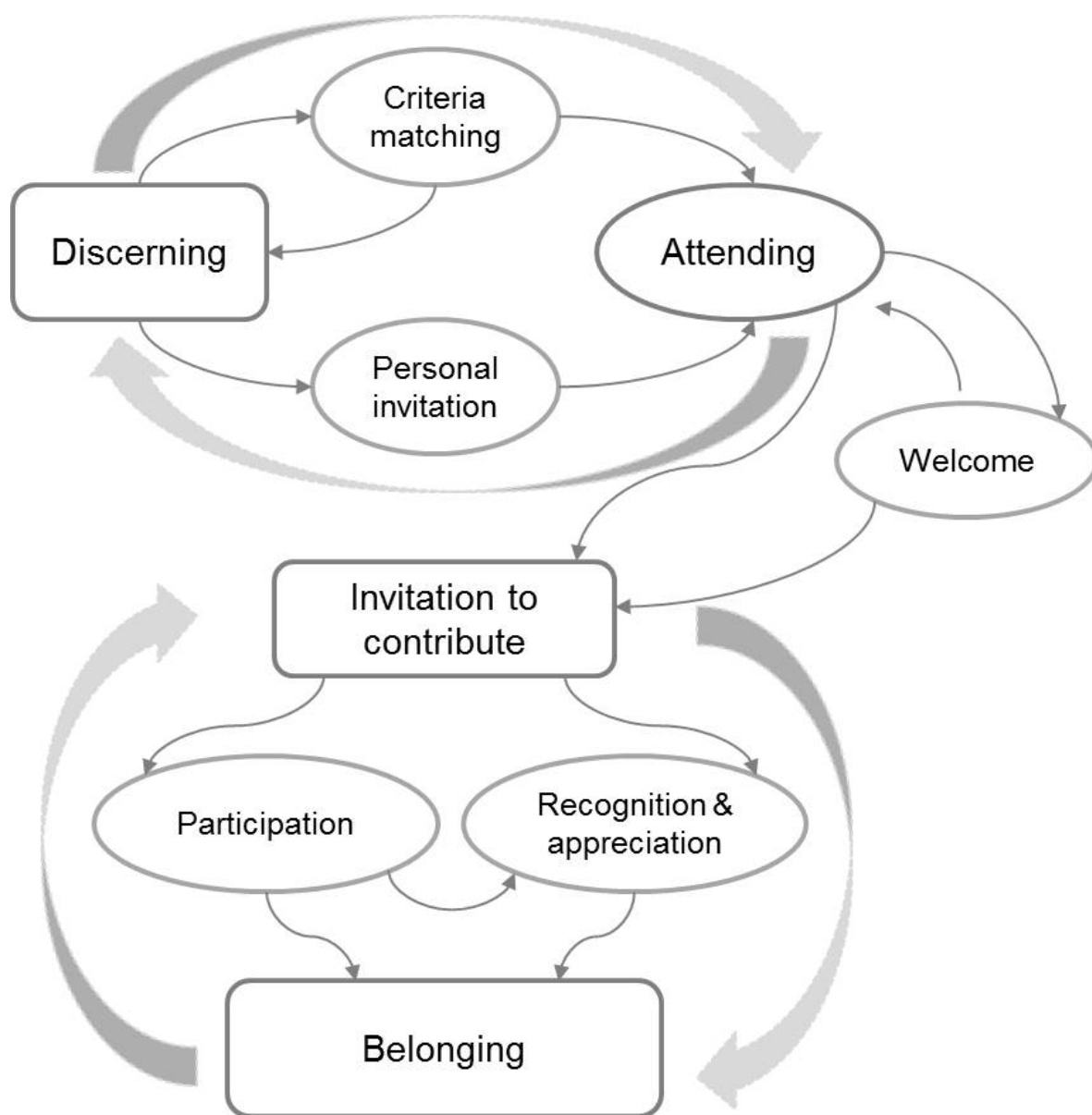


Figure 2. A model of the process towards belonging

The phases in the model are not necessarily time-bounded. It is possible, for instance, that someone may discern which church to attend and on their first visit find both welcome and invitation to contribute, accept that invitation and move to considering themselves as someone who belongs. This was Mark's experience. It is just as possible for someone to be engaged in the discerning

and/or attending phase for extended periods of time but never feel that they have moved towards belonging. For example Helen attended a church frequently but was clear that she did not belong. It would also be possible for someone to actively contribute and participate in the life of a church and through that realise that their selection criteria are not being matched. As such, the process to belonging can be seen as fluid and ongoing – it does not necessarily have a clear end-point.

## 5 Biographies of belonging

In the previous chapter I presented a picture of participants' experiences of seeking and belonging to new church communities and a model of the process towards belonging. In this chapter I present the stories of each participant in order to illustrate how the model applies to each of them. Each of the stories is unique and each participant had very different experiences of the two-year period post university. For some there was a simple progression towards belonging with a single move, a steady job and a quick transition to being part of a new church. For others life was more complex with multiple moves, more than one job, periods of unemployment and connections to several different churches. When viewed through the process to belonging model, however, they share common features and illustrate the connections between the different phases in the model. Collectively the stories present a stark illustration of the importance of the invitation to participate.

### 5.1 Lou

When she finished at university Lou returned to live at home having found a part-time job working with a local Christian youth project. She also worked part-time as a teaching assistant at a local school. When she moved home she returned to the church that she had been part of before she had gone to university. This church was important to her. It was a community who had offered her support when her mother had been seriously ill and it was the place that she became a Christian. She found them to be a community that supported and encouraged her as her faith developed. While she was away at university members of the church community had also kept in touch with her which made it easy to return. In many ways it felt like this church community was an

extension of her family, and was a place where she already had a sense of belonging.

When Lou returned to the church, things were different to how they had been. She found that as a '20 something' she was no longer part of a formally organized group. As a younger member of the church community she was still recognised by people in the church but she did not quite know where she fitted in. After a few months she attended a women's weekend away. This enabled her to get to know people and helped her to develop a renewed sense of community.

When Lou returned the church had a new minister. He met with Lou to find out what she felt her skills and gifts were. As a result he encouraged her to get involved with mentoring young people in the church. This helped her to feel that she had a place in the community. Lou also became involved in the youth and children's work at the church. This happened partly because she already knew the people who led those groups and partly because she was working as a youth and children's worker for a local Christian charity. She did not always say yes to getting involved in things and the relationships she already had with people meant that she felt able to say no when other pressures were too great.

After her year with the youth project Lou took up a place on a PGCE course at a local university. This enabled her to remain living at home and going to her church. During the course she moved around a series of schools for placements, meaning that things were always changing. Sometimes this meant that she felt quite far away from God. Lou found that during this period of change her church community offered a place of stability. She felt comfortable and at home there which meant that as soon as she went into church she was able to switch off and hear God without being distracted by everything else that was going on in her life.

## 5.2 Pippa

Pippa finished university and moved to a new city to take up a one-year intern post. This was with a faith-based organisation but a large part of her role involved working with a secular public sector organisation. The city she moved to was unfamiliar to her. When she arrived Pippa began looking for a new church community almost straight away. She knew exactly what she was looking for in a church and so went about finding somewhere in a very structured way using an explicit set of criteria that she had developed. She was looking for a church that was: Methodist; put faith into action; gave opportunities for serious theological learning; had great singing; was an inclusive community. Her first visit was to a Methodist church that was very prominent in the city and had a good reputation. However, she found that it did not sufficiently match her criteria and tried another church. She decided that this more closely matched her criteria and attended when she could.

Pippa threw herself into her new job that offered her links to groups of Christian students. This meant that she was sometimes able to attend worship events as part of her work. Sometimes her work involved attending events and activities at weekends. The work she was doing was very demanding and the organisations she worked for offered her little support. This frequently left her feeling very tired and drained. She had a boyfriend who lived in another city and she tried to visit him as often as she could. All of this meant that she did not manage to attend church very frequently. On the occasions that she was able to attend she made an effort to get to know people at church, but did not receive any invitations to be involved in the life of the church and did not feel particularly invested in it.

When her internship finished Pippa and her boyfriend moved to live with friends back in their university town. Although Pippa had belonged to a church community while she was at university, this community was connected to the university. When she returned to the city she decided that it was the right time to look for a new church community. She had also begun to sense a call to

ministry in the Methodist church and so wanted to find a local Methodist church to belong to.

Once again, Pippa knew exactly what she wanted, but this was slightly different to what she wanted before. This time she placed more emphasis on finding a community to get involved with rather than searching for something that matched all her criteria. Still wanting to be involved in a Methodist church Pippa contacted a local Methodist Superintendent Minister because she saw that as the most efficient way of finding out about what the local churches were like. She also thought that they might be able to give her an idea about where she could get involved.

Pippa attended a church on the suggestion of the Minister she talked with. When she arrived she did not wait for an invitation to be involved. Instead she asked people at the church if there was anything that she could do. Someone mentioned that they were looking for people to help out at Girls Brigade. Pippa went along and was put in charge of a group of girls. After that, she was 'hooked'.

Very quickly Pippa found that she felt connected to the church community. She found that people began to recognise and say hello to her in the street. She suddenly felt part of a group of people of different ages and from different backgrounds who all lived in the local area. She felt supported by this group of people that she was now connected to and realised that this was what she had been missing. She realised that she belonged.

### **5.3 Rory**

Rory left university and moved to a new town to take up an internship with a Christian organisation. They were keen for him to become part of a church quickly and so he began trying to find a new church community straight away. Rory tried two different churches on the basis of recommendations from a



housemate and a colleague. The first one he tried did not really suit him and he found that he was not able to connect to the style of worship. The second church he tried offered him a warm welcome and in his first week he received an invitation to a barbecue and a men's group social event. He was also invited to become part of a home group. This invitation was significant for Rory because here he found prayer, friendship and food. He felt supported and encouraged by the church community.

Unfortunately the internship did not work out for Rory and after six weeks he decided to leave. He returned to live at home with his parents. When he returned home he decided not to return to the church he had previously attended. This was because having had experiences of other churches during university and his internship Rory realised that they had a particularly narrow theological perspective which he now considered problematic. Rory found it was difficult to get to other churches because his parents lived in a rural area and he did not have any transport. He sometimes went to church with a friend in a nearby city when he stayed with him, but this was limited and infrequent.

After a few months Rory decided to move back to his university town. He moved in with some friends and began to attend the church he went to while he was a student. He used to be part of the music team at the church and when he returned he was invited to be part of this again. To start with he turned this invitation down but eventually started helping with the sound system during services. He then started giving some one-to-one discipleship support to a new member of the church community.

After a while the person Rory had been supporting stopped coming to church and Rory started to do less helping out during services. Rory did not feel needed or appreciated and spent some time wondering about whether he should move to a different church. Around the same time another church invited him to do some video filming/production for them. Through doing that work he got to know people at the other church and was invited to a range of events. Rory was on the cusp of joining this new church community when his current

church asked him if he would lead mission activity at the church. That invitation persuaded him to stay.

Rory started to feel that he belonged to this church community because his opinions were valued, people wanted him to be there and he was able to get involved with leading things rather than just being part of the furniture.

## **5.4 Helen**

Helen finished university and was offered a place on a local government/civil service graduate training scheme. She moved to a new city where she did not know anyone and so had to take up a place in a house-share with strangers.

When she arrived in her new city Helen began trying to find a new church community. She searched the internet for churches which were close to where she was living and found a number of churches to try. In her first few weeks she visited four different churches in quick succession. Two of them were similar to churches she had been to before and she started going to both of them. She chose which one to go to depending on how early she got up on Sunday morning.

Helen did not feel particularly connected to either of them. She felt that she had little in common with other members of the church communities many of whom were either young families or retirees. She also felt that the emphasis was on her to make the effort to get to know people. Although people at the door were friendly when she arrived no one really made an effort to talk to her or get to know her.

Helen was used to engaging with different groups and regularly socialised with work colleagues. She was involved in local politics and became a governor of a local primary school. But she missed having a circle of friends who attended

church and did not manage to find anyone at work that was open about their faith.

Helen had a boyfriend living in another city. She often visited him at weekends. One of her boyfriend's housemates went to a local church and she invited Helen to go to church with her. Helen enjoyed going to church and found that being with someone else who belonged was good. She was introduced to people and she felt welcomed.

Helen was not invited to get involved with anything at the churches she attended in her own city. She was not sure how she would have responded if she had been invited to get involved because she was wary of being coerced into helping with something straight away and wanted to keep some weekends free to visit her boyfriend. She wanted to try to find a church that she could go to during the week and looked for an early morning service that she could get to before work. This was something that she did not manage to find.

Over time she stopped going to the churches in her own city. She continued to go to church when she visited her boyfriend, but because he did not go to church she found this increasingly difficult to sustain. She did not manage to find belonging in a church community.

## **5.5 Oliver**

Oliver moved to live in Germany when he left university. For the first three months he worked at a school, living in a village close to where he was working. He occasionally attended the local village church but did not get any real sense of being welcomed by the church community and felt that he had little in common with many there.

Oliver then moved to another city and worked for a number of months at an advertising agency. Over that time he decided to continue with academic studies and left his job and took up a place at the university in the same town.

He lived a little out of the town and to start with he often did not feel particularly motivated to get up on a Sunday morning to attend church as they were all in the town centre. When he did not attend he read his bible and watched online sermons to help him sustain his faith. After a short while he began to attend the University Church for a 'preaching service' which was a theological lecture combined with a church service. He felt that the preaching gave him a sense of belonging, but this was not very strong sense as he lacked any sense of relationship with others who were attending.

Although Oliver was not regularly attending anything he identified as a church community at this time he did regularly attend a student Christian group. This offered him an opportunity for worship, prayer and teaching as well as space for discussion and reflection. He was actively involved in this group and felt supported and encouraged by people there. In addition to this he also attended a regular meditation group that was hosted by a local catholic church. This more contemplative event was something he felt helped him connect to God in a way that the more charismatic worship he was used to did not.

After about nine months Oliver started to attend another church in the town on a more regular basis. He was invited by some friends who were already going there. At the end of the research he had not been attending for very long and had found that other commitments meant that he was away for a lot of weekends. He felt that before he could properly belong to the church community he would need to commit to being there more regularly so that he could get more involved with things and get to know people. But he hadn't decided whether this was something he wanted to do and had begun to wonder whether he would get to a point where he belonged.

## **5.6 William**

When he finished university William got a job with a small charity. The job allowed him to choose where in the country he lived because it involved working

from home. He chose to move back home to live with his parents rather than closer to his girlfriend who was studying in another city. William had been part of a church in his home town during his teenage years and when he returned to live with his parents he decided to return to that church. He entertained the possibility of trying other churches but made a decision to stick with what he knew. He also was not sure that he would be able to commit time to finding somewhere else to go.

Most people at the church already knew him well and he had a number of existing friendships. This meant that he was able to take up these relationships where he had left off and did not receive a newcomer's welcome. It was more like a welcome home. Over time William sensed that the church makeup changed. He began to find that there were more people of a similar age to him and he was invited to be part of a newly formed group for 18-25s. Relationships within the group grew and strengthened and William began to find that people noticed when he was not there and asked after him. He began to feel a sense of belonging to that sub-community as well as to the rest of the church community.

William made going to church a priority and went as often as he could. He found that he could not go every Sunday because he was sometimes away travelling as part of his work. He also took some weekends out to go and visit his girlfriend. When he was visiting her they went to church together. They tried a number of different churches because she had recently moved and was trying to find a new church community. They attended one church several times but felt that every time they went they were treated like they were there for the first time. This was because the church congregation was very big and it was difficult to get to know people. William enjoyed trying new churches with his girlfriend but sometimes felt that these visits took another week out of going to his own church.

William was reluctant to get involved with activities at his church because he did not feel that he was attending frequently enough. He was invited to be involved in the music group but turned this down because he did not think he would be

able to give the right level of commitment due to the other demands on his time. The invitations kept coming and were offered with 'no pressure' by someone who knew him well. William prayed about these invitations, and decided that the Lord was telling him that the time was not right for him to get involved. Even though he did not get involved in these activities, he appreciated the invitations he received which made him feel recognised and valued by the church community. He felt that he belonged to this community.

## **5.7 Mark**

When he finished his university course Mark was offered a job in the same city he had been studying in. He was pleased to be able to stay in the same city because this meant that he could continue to attend the church he had been part of during his undergraduate years. He had found the church on his second week at university and had been going ever since. He tried another church in his first week but found that despite first appearances it was not Anglican so he did not go back. Finding a church that was both near to where he lived and Anglican was important to Mark.

The church that he went to had quickly welcomed him. This welcome was important to him when he first arrived and later he noticed that there were a few individuals who consistently made an effort to welcome newcomers.

Not long after he arrived Mark was invited to get involved in the church community. He became involved in a range of activities including the church choir, being an altar server, and acting in the church pantomime.

During his undergraduate course Mark spent a year working in a rural area away from university. When he arrived he looked for a church to attend using the same criteria he had used at university (Anglican and local). This led to him going to the local Anglican church where he also became involved in a range of

activities. When he returned to university for his final year he stayed in touch with that church community.

After university Mark continued with the activities he was already doing at his church but also took on new responsibilities. He became a member of the PCC. Around the same time members of the church began to realise that through his work as an environmental surveyor Mark had a wealth of knowledge about environmental issues. This led to him being invited to set up a 'Green Team' to help the church engage with environmental issues.

Mark was sometimes frustrated that the demands of his job meant that it was not always possible for him to attend church, or to take part in activities he had committed to because he placed a high priority on attending regularly. But he had a strong sense that his participation was important, that he was valued, and that his service in the church was part of God's calling. Mark had a strong sense of belonging to this church community.

## **5.8 Henry**

After university Henry decided that he wanted to study for a PhD. He moved south and ended up living back at home with his father while he invested lots of time in developing a proposal and applying for funding. His father lived in a small village which was a long way from many of his friends. He did not have a regular job, but made some income working as a model.

When Henry returned to live with his father he did not find a church to attend with any frequency. He encountered several barriers to finding a church. Henry's father had previously had a bad experience at the local village church and this made Henry disinclined to go there. When he moved back home Henry was also exploring his sexuality and he found it difficult to reconcile his socially liberal position with his previous experiences at churches which had been rather conservative. He also recognised that he is not someone who enjoys being

involved in group activities and finds groups a bit claustrophobic. One of the things that most concerned him about attending a new church was whether he would be faced with lots of probing personal questions. All of this made it difficult for Henry to engage with the process of finding a new church community and he felt that he had limited options. Although he identified local churches that he could attend he did not do so. However, when he had the opportunity he attended services at a cathedral which he felt offered the opportunity to be part of worship in a relatively anonymous way.

Although Henry did not find a new church community when he lived at home, he continued to look for ways of expressing his faith. He read some popular theology books, and maintained contact with Christian friends. When he was visiting them he sometimes went to church with them. One of the most important ways for him to express his faith was through art. He wrote poetry and got involved in collaborative photographic projects.

At the end of the research Henry had been offered a place to study for a PhD. He had started to search the internet for possible churches to try when he moved to a new city to take up his place. This search had led him to identify a church that looked similar to the one he had belonged to while at university. In addition to his own searches Henry had also started talking with family who had knowledge of churches in the city he was preparing to move to seeking possible recommendations from them. He was hopeful about finding a new church community to belong to when he started life in a new city.



## 6 Discussion

### 6.1 Discerning

Discerning is the point where participants entered into the process of searching for new church communities to belong to. Discerning is a purposeful act. It is about engaging with the task of seeking a place to belong. It is about trying to identify a church that is the one most appropriate to attend and ultimately belong to.

Pierre Bourdieu's theory of social capital, and in particular the concepts of field and habitus, offers an interpretation of the above mentioned discernment process.<sup>182</sup> Seen through this lens, the post-University relocation undertaken by participants means they are entering into a new field (or in some cases re-entering a previously encountered field, albeit with a new position and status). The field they are entering is complex. It comprises of a range of denominations, individual churches and distinct congregational communities to which they might belong.

Jenkins suggests that to use Bourdieu's concept of field requires an understanding of three important elements.<sup>183</sup> First, the relationship of the field in question to the dominant field (since the dominant field determines the structure of all other fields related to it). Second, how the relationships within the field are understood relative to the capital the field contains. Third, how the

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<sup>182</sup> Bourdieu (1986).

<sup>183</sup> Jenkins, p.86.

habitus of the actors in the field interacts with the constraints that are present in the field.

For Bourdieu the dominant field would be that which controls the 'goods of salvation' and it would be religious capital that is at stake within this field.<sup>184</sup> As discussed in chapter 2, this is a narrow way of understanding the religious field and perhaps makes sense only within the context where there is one church that has an absolute control over access to the 'goods of salvation'. The field that participants enter as they search for a new church is far more nuanced since there are multiple options of churches that they could chose to attend. Similarly, participants are not necessarily concerned with who controls the 'goods of salvation' (none came from a background with a strong sense of a need to be 'in communion') but they are concerned about having a place in which they can practice their faith alongside others. It may be better, therefore, to describe the capital in the field as 'faith capital'.

Bourdieu argues that as individuals enter into a new field they seek to find a locus within it that matches most closely the habitus that they bring with them in order to avoid a field-habitus clash.<sup>185</sup> An individual's habitus is formed and shaped by a range of previous experiences. All of the participants in this study have formed a habitus that has a significant faith element to it which is related to church belonging. Some of the significant elements in forming this aspect of their habitus include family involvement and encouragement, styles and modes of belonging while at University, their habit of attending church and the place of church in their lifestyle. Although each participant has a unique habitus, each features faith sufficiently that they want to find a place within the field of faith.

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<sup>184</sup> Rey, p.337.

<sup>185</sup> Karl Maton, 'Habitus', in *Pierre Bourdieu: Key Concepts*, ed. by Michael J. Grenfell (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), pp. 48-64, p.58.

Discernment can be understood as the process by which participants seek a church which matches their habitus. Having tentatively entered into the new field each encounter with a particular church (or set of churches) offers them more potential to understand the field and, more significantly, the relationships that exist within it. For example, it may take some time to fully understand the style of worship and the theological perspective of an individual church (especially if there are a variety of people who lead different aspects of services week by week) or to work out where it fits into the local church landscape. The field is never static because it is made up of the interactions of the capital, habitus and power of all those who form the field. Thus, it may also take some time to fully assess the dynamics of a new church with more understanding being developed with each encounter. There may be a mismatch between the initial perceptions of the dynamics of the field and the actual dynamics meaning that it can be difficult for participants to understand whether their sense of habitus is aligned with the field and thus discern whether this is the right church for them.

Turning to the consumer lens we are given a different perspective. The analysis of data shows all the participants using some form of consumer behaviour when they first looked for a new church to belong to. For many this involved creating an increasingly complex set of criteria against which to judge potential churches. It is important to remember that consumer behaviour does not require a purchase of a product or service, rather it is concerned with the activities that are undertaken in the lead up to a decision being made.<sup>186</sup> In the case of finding a church, that starts with identifying a suitable range of products (in this case a church) and then making some form of evaluation of the alternatives that are available.

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<sup>186</sup> R.D. Blackwell, P.W. Miniard, and J.F. Engel, *Consumer Behaviour*, (Mason: Southwestern, 2001).

The approaches taken by participants seem to correlate with the observations outlined in the consumer culture literature about the all-pervading influence of consumerism on western society.<sup>187 188</sup> Cultural theorists such as Zygmunt Bauman argue that those of us living in the West are now fully immersed in consumerism from the moment we are born. When faced with any decision to make, or need to satisfy, our immediate approach is saturated with consumerism. Thus when an individual who had previously belonged to a church relocates and wants to find a new church they approach the task as a consumer.

Such a consumerist approach introduces the tension between freedom and security. As Bauman observes, 'Freedom offers many wonderful things, but it does not offer one thing crucial to individual well-being – certainty – being sure that what they are doing is right'.<sup>189</sup> In other words, the more freedom that someone has to choose, the greater the number of choices available to them which, in turn, increases their sense of uncertainty. Faced with great uncertainty making a choice becomes ever more difficult.

One way of reducing that uncertainty is to limit the number of available choices. This can be done by considering which of those options would gain societal approval.<sup>190</sup> For those looking for a new church that societal approval may

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<sup>187</sup> T. Cantell, 'Modernity, Postmodernity and Ethics - an Interview with Zygmunt Bauman', *Telos*, 93 (1992), 133-144, p.141.

<sup>188</sup> David Lyon, *Jesus in Disneyland: Religion in Postmodern Times*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000).

<sup>189</sup> T. Cantell, 'Modernity, Postmodernity and Ethics - an Interview with Zygmunt Bauman', *Telos*, 93 (1992), 133-141.

<sup>190</sup> For a discussion of the evolution of Bauman's thought around freedom and security in consumer society see Mark Davis, *Freedom and Consumerism: A Critique of Zygmunt Bauman's Sociology*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008).

come from those who had previously formed their community of belonging. Where that community has a strongly held self-identity, they are presented with a limited range of acceptable choices when looking for a new church. If someone comes from a church community that has a strong conservatively evangelical identity, for example, they are likely to be steered by that community towards similarly conservative churches in the future because the only acceptable choice is a community with a similar identity. For those coming from churches without such a strong sense of identity the range of acceptable choices is likely to be much wider. The data showed that those who had a limited number of options appeared to find it easier to choose a church to attend, whereas those with a wide variety of options struggled to make a clear choice of a single church.

Consumer approaches have been associated with the search for the perfect object, which continues even after the object has first been attained. Bauman links this to the consumer logic of continually seeking to replace things (including the range of human contacts) that have lost their public allure or market value. In other words, there is a continual drive towards having the 'new and improved'.<sup>191</sup> This approach can be seen to a certain extent in the way in which participants identified a wide range of possible churches to attend with the intention of trying one of them for a short time before moving on to another. The risk of continually trying new things in the search for the 'new and improved', however, is that it creates an atmosphere of transience and restlessness. When this is added to the transience which those who have recently left university experience in the rest of their lives, this is likely to make discerning a church to attend increasingly difficult.

A theological lens opens up alternative ways of understanding the process of discerning which churches to attend that are not adequately addressed by consumer cultural or social capital theories. For many participants finding a

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<sup>191</sup> Bauman, p.103.

church was a spiritual exercise which involved seeking God's will, sometimes through explicitly prayerful activity. For them there was an expectation that God would be involved in the process of choosing a church. For example 'I was praying about whether I should go back to the church I was brought up in or should I look at other churches' (William).

Discerning using prayerful approaches on the surface can appear to be an abstract activity. In seeking God's guidance, however, there needs to be some way in which an individual can interpret the signs around them and decide whether they are answers to prayer. A set of markers, or selection criteria, can perform that role. William, for instance, talked about prayerfully considering a range of options and judging churches against a set of criteria. This shows some similarity to the Ignatian approach to discernment that uses three stages.<sup>192</sup> The first of these is prayer. The second is a gathering of evidence that includes observation of the circumstances in which someone finds themselves and dialogue with others who may be able to offer perspectives or further evidence. The final stage is confirmation, which involves an individual recognising an internal sense of peace and contentment about a decision that is made and receiving external recognition and support for that decision. As they were searching for new church communities participants went through a process of gathering and weighing evidence which led them to decisions that brought them a sense of peace and contentment that was expressed in terms of having a sense that it was God's will for them.

Using a spiritual or faith-based approach to discerning which church to attend may be in tension with both a consumer choice approach and a social capital approach and may lead to choices that would not necessarily be expected using either of those lenses. Bringing a sense of God's guidance into the process opens up the possibility that someone may choose to attend a church that does

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<sup>192</sup> John Carroll Futrell, 'Ignatian Discernment', *Studies in the spirituality of Jesuits*, II (1970).

not meet the selection criteria that they initially developed and/or does not closely match their habitus. Ultimately this points to a disconnect between the logic of the market, the dynamics of field and habitus, and a decision based upon faith. These faith-based decisions are those, which Williams points out 'are made after some struggle and reflection, after some serious effort to discover what it means to be in Christ'.<sup>193</sup>

## 6.2 Attending

In an interview Helen talked about a church that she went to regularly. When I asked her if she belonged there she said no. She had a sense that she was an 'attender' rather than someone who fully belonged. This is an important distinction.

The literature published around attendance appears to fall into two distinct camps. On the one hand there are studies that explore patterns of attendance by surveying whether participants are present in church on a given Sunday, or how often they are present in a particular time period. This approach has led to Guest's development of a number of categories of attendance for students who self-identify as Christians.<sup>194</sup> These range from the active affirmers who are consistently frequent in their attendance, to the unchurched Christians who are consistent in their non-attendance. On the other there are a number of studies

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<sup>193</sup> Rowan Williams, 'On Making Moral Decisions', *Anglican Theological Review*, 81 (1999).

<sup>194</sup> Guest and others, (2013), p.39.

that explore the relationship between believing and belonging.<sup>195 196 197</sup> These explore the place of faith in the creation of a personal religious identity (or as Bourdieu would describe it part of the habitus). However, this literature tends towards showing individual religious identity that is separated from a strong sense of religious practice or community. What is missing from both is any exploration of what attending means in the context of moving towards belonging.

Data from my study shows that participants' distinctions between attending and belonging was not necessarily linked to patterns of frequency. Attendance could be at the level of a casual visit, as when someone stays with a friend and goes to church with them, but could equally be a more regular occurrence. For example when I interviewed Helen she was attending a particular church quite frequently (up to twice a month) yet conceived of herself as an attender rather than someone who belonged.

One way of understanding this distinction is in terms of the level of investment that is made in the relationship. Those who describe themselves as attending are likely to have a low level of investment in the community.<sup>198</sup> Instead of trying to find ways into the community they simply join in at a level that seems appropriate on that occasion. In contrast, those who said that they belonged had all found some form of active participation in the life of the community.

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<sup>195</sup> Abby Day, 'Believing in Belonging: An Ethnography of Young People's Constructions of Belief', *Culture and Religion*, 10 (2009).

<sup>196</sup> Davie.

<sup>197</sup> Voas and Crockett.

<sup>198</sup> David W McMillan and David M Chavis, 'Sense of Community: A Definition and Theory', *Journal of Community Psychology*, 14 (1986), p.10.



From a consumer cultural perspective the idea of attending rather than belonging makes sense. As Cavanaugh notes, consumerism does not focus on hoarding and developing attachment, but rather on detachment.<sup>199</sup> Consumer culture also sees things (including relationships) as temporary and transient which does not encourage the creation of lasting attachment.<sup>200</sup> If the expectation of forming lasting attachment is limited then this means that simply attending is sufficient.

A social capital perspective, however, allows us to see attending as performing an important role in the move towards belonging. Through undertaking a period of attending, an individual is able to work out the dynamics of the power relationships within the field, assess whether their personal sense of habitus sufficiently matches that of the other agents in the field and enter into the process of position taking. This gives them the opportunity to create relationships that offer access to the power that is contained within the field and the capital that is available.<sup>201</sup> Helen attended a church a number of times and said that she liked the style of the service, but she found it very difficult to talk to people and get to know what it was really like. In effect she was shut out of the power relationships in the field.

The period of attendance that someone needs to undertake before moving to belonging may be related to the size and structure of the field that they enter. Each agent in a field has an affect on the structure of the field.<sup>202</sup> This means

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<sup>199</sup> William T. Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2008), p.34.

<sup>200</sup> See Bauman's discussion of relationships in Bauman, p.18f.

<sup>201</sup> Patricia Thomson, 'Field', in *Pierre Bourdieu: Key Concepts*, ed. by Michael J. Grenfell (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), 65-82, (p.67).

<sup>202</sup> Jenkins.

that when someone new enters into a field there is a change in the dynamics. If the field that is being entered is large and the individual brings little power with them (i.e. they are of little significance to those who are already in the field), their presence is unlikely to bring about any significant change. In this case, the period of attendance gives the individual the opportunity to assess whether their habitus aligns with the structure that is present and decide whether to invest in forming attachments or move on and begin the process again. If the field is small a new individual may find it easier to identify and engage with where the power is held. They may also find that they are able to have a larger effect on the field, bringing it more closely in line with their own sense of habitus. In this case someone may remain in the attending phase for some time as they seek to assess and then take position in the field.

The structure of the field may also be significant in terms of the period of attendance. Fields that exhibit a clear sense of the structure and where the power lies within them may be easier to assess than those that are more fluid. This means that within a more structured field it is potentially easier to discern what the field is really like, to get a strong sense of the values that it holds and to work out whether they match those of the individual. In this case, the period of attendance may be relatively short. Lou for example met with the minister who talked directly about how she might be involved in the life of the church. From this conversation Lou was able to gain a sense that the minister held power and to a large extent controlled the structure of the field. This was reinforced when he directly offered her an invitation to access the field. A field that is less rigidly structured is potentially more difficult to assess. It may be unclear who controls aspects of the power and there may be differing senses of the values and dynamics of the field. This makes it more difficult for someone newly entering that field to discern what the dynamics really are and thus whether their habitus is aligned with them. In this situation the attending phase may last for some while.

Patterns of attendance are often related to the concept of habit which has been explored in a range of literatures.<sup>203 204 205 206 207</sup> From a cultural theory perspective habit enables an individual to become familiar with the patterns of behaviour of the community. This in turn allows for the negotiation of boundaries of inclusion and exclusion.<sup>208</sup> For example, Helen attended church with her boyfriend's housemate whenever she visited and stayed for a weekend. This was part of being accepted into that friendship group. Interestingly her boyfriend did not attend with her. He did not share the same faith perspective and thus did not place any importance on being included as part of that subculture.

From a social capital perspective, habit enables the power relationships within the field to be strengthened, provides access to the capital held in the field and eventually allows for the dynamics to be changed. Consumer theory aligns habit

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<sup>203</sup> Phillippa Lally and others, 'How Are Habits Formed: Modelling Habit Formation in the Real World', *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 40 (2010).

<sup>204</sup> Wendy Wood and David T. Neal, 'A New Look at Habits and the Habit-Goal Interface', *Psychological Review*, 114 (2007).

<sup>205</sup> W. Jager, 'Breaking 'Bad Habits': A Dynamical Perspective on Habit Formation and Change', in *Understanding and Assisting Human Decision Making in Real-Life Settings*, ed. by L. Hendrickx, W. Jager, and L. Steg (Groningen: University of Groningen, 2003).

<sup>206</sup> Karen E Dynan, 'Habit Formation in Consumer Preferences: Evidence from Panel Data', *American Economic Review*, (2000).

<sup>207</sup> Robert A Pollak, 'Habit Formation and Dynamic Demand Functions', *The Journal of Political Economy*, (1970).

<sup>208</sup> Douglas.

with loyalty. Once someone has developed identification with a brand they are more likely to remain attached to that.

Theologically there are two major insights that are helpful. First, habit may be formed out of a sense of commitment and compulsion of faith. For some participants, for instance, there was a strong sense of spiritual discipline with church attendance forming part of that. Participants cited Biblical material saying ‘do not neglect meeting with one another.’ (Hebrews 10. 25-27.) It is also worth noting that those participants who had strong connections with Christian Union while at University are likely to have had the importance of attending church regularly impressed upon them (see for example publications written for UCCF, Kandiah<sup>209</sup> Gallagher<sup>210</sup>). Second, habit is formed out of a desire for God.<sup>211</sup> The pattern of regular involvement in public worship is part of an expression of desire for God. At times it can act as public witness, at other points it can be the outworking of the covenant relationship between members of the body of Christ.

### **6.3 Between attending and belonging: welcome & invitation to contribute**

Participants were able to make a clear distinction between attending and belonging, and data showed that there was a clear watershed between the two. Two aspects form this watershed – being welcomed and receiving an invitation to contribute.

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<sup>209</sup> Kandiah.

<sup>210</sup> Gallagher.

<sup>211</sup> Bom.

From a social capital perspective feeling welcomed indicates that an individual has received some degree of acceptance from other agents in the field and has been granted access to the capital that is contained within the field.<sup>212</sup> That acceptance may be related to the extent to which an individual is perceived to fit into the community, or to meet the criteria by which a community judges itself. This is an outworking of bonding social capital, where those who are most alike connect together most easily.<sup>213 214</sup>

In relation to church attendance and belonging, there is a sense that since anyone can walk into a church and join in with a service all are welcome. This welcome is strongly expressed in much of the liturgy used within church services. Here it is used in the sense that an individual is being welcomed into the community of God and that it is Christ who extends the welcome. The acknowledgement that 'all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God' (Romans 3. 23.) also extends an invitation to all to enter into a renewed relationship with God that is made possible through Christ. Unfortunately, however, participants did not necessarily experience that universal sense of welcome within the church communities they attended, suggesting that socially constructed aspects of welcome potentially eclipse the outstretched hands of Christ. This runs contrary to Jesus' own ministry and teaching which strongly features both invitation and welcome. In the gospels we see that Jesus' welcome is extended to both individuals and to groups (Luke 9. 11.) and that his invitation to 'come and follow' (Matthew 4. 19, Matthew 9. 9.) or 'come and see' (John 1. 39.) is offered to a wide range of people. Jesus also directly challenges the idea that the community of the faithful does not welcome certain people

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<sup>212</sup> Bourdieu.

<sup>213</sup> Putnam.

<sup>214</sup> James S. Coleman, 'Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital', *American journal of sociology*, 94 (1988).

when he rebukes the disciples saying 'let the children come to me do not try to stop them'. (Mark 10. 14.)

The idea of welcome does not feature strongly in consumer cultural theory. It could potentially be understood as signifying access or inclusion in the marketplace, but such ideas are dealt with more comprehensively in the sociological literature. As such consumer culture sheds little light on what it means to be welcomed.

The invitation to contribute is also difficult to understand using a consumer cultural lens. Much of consumer theory is concerned with the theme of creating continual desire, especially in relation to new products. An invitation to contribute potentially moves control away from the producers and puts it to the consumer and opens the possibility for consumers becoming creators. There are hints of such an invitation amongst communities of product enthusiasts, especially where there is some expectation of co-creation between enthusiasts and product developers. For example, GoPro camera users are invited to upload video, thereby contributing to the community of enthusiasts and possibly sparking further product innovations.<sup>215</sup> Their contribution, however, is judged by the product developers themselves and it is they who decide whether it is worthy of inclusion in the community. In return contributors are offered the opportunity to become recognised by peers, and access 'insider' information user tips and special offers via the community. Within the consumer arena the invitation is really only one to continue to consume a particular brand of product.

Using the lens of social capital, it is possible to interpret an invitation to contribute as something which those who are already part of the field use to actively signify acceptance of a newcomer. If those doing the inviting are understood to be those who hold power then this is an important turning point.

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<sup>215</sup> GoPro, 'Gopro: Be a Hero', (2016) <<https://gopro.com/channel/video-of-the-day>> [accessed 04 January 2016].

Importantly, power does not necessarily rest with those who are designated leaders. For some participants the invitation to contribute came from people situated within the community, and not necessarily from the leader. In many ways those who have power are those who are in the position in the field that allows them to most truly incorporate new entrants into the field. Being invited to contribute confers position in the field. If an individual accepts the invitation and goes on to make a contribution this likely to cement their position further and enable them to become fully immersed in the field.

From a theological perspective the invitation to contribute fits into the idea of 'call' and is aligned with being members of the body of Christ. All are 'called' by God into relationship with the Father, through the Son and this is enabled by the power of the Spirit. The invitation to contribute is in reality an invitation to relationship with others who are also members of the same body. It can therefore be understood as a vehicle for allowing the individual to flourish as the person God has called them to be and to be fully part of the body of Christ as expressed within the local church. Importantly, participants who expressed a sense of belonging were those who had received and accepted invitations to contribute to a variety of social actions and activities in a church. This suggests that it is only through being invited into those activities that the possibility of belonging is offered to them.

## 6.4 Belonging

In the research on church belonging participants appear to self define as belonging or not.<sup>216 217 218 219</sup> This suggests that whatever the role of the

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<sup>216</sup> Jamieson.

<sup>217</sup> Roof.

<sup>218</sup> Francis and Richter.

community in offering welcome or invitation it is the individual who determines that they belong. As I have shown consumer cultural, social capital and theological lenses each offer ways of understanding different parts of this process. Since belonging is self-determined, however, none of these lenses can offer an adequate description of what belonging actually looks like and how it is experienced by the individual. This requires a more broad-ranging discussion.

Church membership does not necessarily equate with church belonging, but it could be considered as a marker of belonging. In most denominations an individual has developed a sense of belonging before they are formally conferred the status of member. This is markedly different to many contexts where someone becomes a member before they have developed a conceptual sense of belonging such as a school, sports club, or place of employment. This was the experience of some participants who became part of churches that had a mechanism that formally conferred 'membership'. In these cases it was the participants that determined that they were at a point where they wished to be formally incorporated into the community and become part of the membership. Although it was the churches that ultimately made the decision about whether someone could become a member, it was not they who decided whether someone considered themselves to 'belong'.

This leads us to ask questions about how belonging is constructed. For Day, who explores the nature of belief and social identity, it is in part a mental construction.<sup>220</sup> Her focus on the nature and content of belief leads her to describe belonging in relation to a set of concepts rather than a community. It is these concepts that are used to form a sense of self-identity that is situated within social contexts. In many ways it is the perceptions that an individual has of the environment they are in and their sense of ease within that environment

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<sup>219</sup> Richter and Francis.

<sup>220</sup> Day.



which is central to whether they describe themselves as belonging. However much others in the environment welcome and try to include them unless there is a sense of connection formed out of similar perspectives there will not be a sense of belonging. From this viewpoint it is entirely possible to describe belonging in terms of the match between field and habitus. We must not lose sight of the fact, however, that the field is dynamic and is continually being formed by a whole network of relationships between individuals. Describing belonging as a mental construction is not sufficient because it makes it an individual task where in reality it is something that is relational. Church belonging happens in relation to a community and therefore must have an element of social construction. This can be seen in the experience of participants who said that they belonged. For them there was clear expression of their feelings of being recognised and appreciated, which arose out of their relationships and interaction with the church community.

Belonging is one of those 'you know it when you see it' but difficult to describe concepts (like 'community' or 'culture'). It is possible to define it in broadly two different ways meaning either ownership or right fit. In talking about belonging in the context of church community the sense of 'right fit' is most relevant.

A number of participants talked about those they met at churches inviting them to 'make yourself at home'. For those who were part of my research 'home' was a contested thing. The participants were all at a point of transition where 'home' was in some ways uncertain. Throughout University life they lived with a sense of impermanence with 'home' being a place that they returned to during vacation time. Although this 'home' is in reality where their parents live and is likely to be subject to changes over time, it nonetheless offers them a fixed point in a continually shifting landscape.<sup>221</sup> As such the parental 'home' is familiar and yet often subtly different to the last time they were there. For many participants the post-University period ushered in another time of transition that involved

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<sup>221</sup> Brendan Callaghan, 'What Does It Mean to Belong?', *The Way*, 2 (1998).

them oscillating between shared houses, parental homes, periods of travelling, or temporary residence with friends. 'Home' continued to be a contested idea that is jumbled with a range of relationships and commitments. Notwithstanding these practical realities, 'home' as a concept includes a range of common features. Ultimately the idea of 'home' is a place where you should be able to be comfortable, where you know the rules of the game, where you are able to be yourself without need for explanation or apology. 'Home' confers a sense of security that gives confidence to embrace uncertainty. As such familiarity, safety, reassurance and freedom to be yourself are the markers of home.

The familiarity is twofold. It is first a physical recognition across a range of different aspects. These include recognition of the physical space (I know where I am in space), of those who occupy it (I know and am known by others there), and of the activity that is occurring (what is happening follows a pattern I know). Secondly it is a sense of ease within those aspects. Just because something is familiar it does not immediately follow that there is a sense of ease with it. For example the formality of a cathedral may be familiar but some people do not experience this as a place where they feel relaxed. Safety is found in the relationships that are formed. Those that talked about belonging described relationships that had a relaxed easy going friendship element to them. They talked of joking and teasing each other. Those same relationships were also described as the places where people took a real care and interest in their wellbeing. Those safe relationships offer a sense of reassurance. When faced with difficulties in life it is really valuable having someone, or a community of people, who will offer support and encouragement within a transitory and changing landscape. Freedom is found when someone is in a place that allows both criticism and mistakes. This freedom allows for boundaries to be pushed, but for there to be a degree of safety in the pushing.

'Making yourself at home', or 'homemaking' is at the heart of belonging. It corresponds to Thomas Tweed's sense of 'dwelling' expounded in his seminal

work Crossing and Dwelling.<sup>222</sup> The process by which people get to the dwelling requires them to cross multiple boundaries. This corresponds with the model that I have outlined of the process towards belonging with each phase representing a boundary crossing . As the participants crossed boundaries they engaged in a continual process of sense making as they sought places that offered the safety, security and freedom of a new home.

For Tweed religions are spatial practices 'in which women and men are continually in the process of mapping a symbolic landscape and constructing a symbolic dwelling in which they might have their own space and find their own place.'<sup>223</sup> Thus we see that the participants search for belonging is not a certain and fixed task. For as Tweed says 'religions are partial, tentative, and continually redrawn sketches of where we are, where we've been, and where we're going.'<sup>224</sup> This means that for each person there is a unique map. No two people have the same experiences or interpretation of shared experiences. As Tweed argues dwelling is about the 'kinetics of homemaking'<sup>225</sup> it involves the active process of mapping, building and inhabiting space over time. It is never a completed task.

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<sup>222</sup> Tweed.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid, p.73.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid, p.74.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid, p.80.

## 7 Theological Reflection

### 7.1 An approach to theological reflection

In the preceding chapters I have outlined the experiences of recent graduates as they search for new church communities to belong to and a model that illustrates the process by which they search for belonging in new church communities. Throughout that process I have drawn on material and insights from the disciplines of sociology and consumer cultural theory. For some elements of the study I have also drawn upon both the sociology of religion and religious geography. But first and foremost this thesis is intended as a work of practical theology. In looking at a theology of the incarnation in relation to ecclesiological study Harald Hegstad comments ‘doesn’t God becoming human really mean that he makes himself an object for human experience?’<sup>226</sup> The experience of my participants in the light of a relationship with God is quite rightly a subject for further theological exploration.

Although this research has thus far employed tools from a range of disciplines the purpose of so doing is to seek the theological dimension. As Paul Fiddes argues

Since faith is embodied in worldly and secular forms, it is appropriate that ecclesiology should use some secular tools to analyze these forms. In our age these are predominantly the tools of the human sciences, but since this is *theology*, these are not to be used as if they were autonomous disciplines; they are to be used in the service of theological

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<sup>226</sup> Harald Hegstad, 'Ecclesiology and Empirical Research on the Church', in *Explorations in Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, ed. by Christian B. Scharen (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2012), pp. 34-47, p.35.

reflection, to assist us to find the theological dimension in the worldly forms of life.<sup>227</sup>

At times the theological dimension of participants' experiences may be very clear and explicit. For example, when a participant talked about their experience of prayer as part of a process of discerning which church to attend. At other times it is much more difficult to discover that dimension. At those times the task is 'to find the theological dimension within the worldly forms of community, to be able to reflect on the presence, nature, purpose and activity of the triune God that can be perceived within and through the form.'<sup>228</sup> My intention in this chapter is to focus on the latter since this offers a means of further understanding the phenomena encountered which adds to the insights developed using the methods of sociological enquiry.

For practical theology to be in any sense practical it needs to be applied. It cannot be simply about reflection. It also requires there to be a dimension that is concerned with action. The relationship between the researcher and the participant within a piece of practical theological research ultimately require that insights are shared and in turn practice is potentially transformed. As Fiddes notes 'This is more than a theological reflection on the church by detached observers; investigators and observed community develop a shared *habitus* and so develop a "bodily" wisdom beyond the merely conceptual'.<sup>229</sup> Thus what is offered in this chapter is reflection leading into practical suggestions in the concluding chapter of this thesis.

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<sup>227</sup> Paul S. Fiddes, 'Ecclesiology and Ethnography: Two Disciplines, Two Worlds?', in *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, ed. by Pete Ward (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2012), pp. 13-35, p.20.

<sup>228</sup> Ibid, p.30.

<sup>229</sup> Ibid, p.35.

In turning to explicit theological reflection I want to critically explore three questions that emerge from the research thus far and seek to understand these from the perspective of critical faithfulness.<sup>230</sup> Each of the questions addresses one of the major phases identified in the model of the process towards belonging at the end of Chapter 4. First, the approaches used to finding a church all made use of the tools of consumerism. Given the ubiquitous nature of consumer approaches to finding church is it possible to reconcile their use with a search for belonging in the community of God? Second, I have identified that there is a watershed between attending a church and belonging to a church community. This watershed is formed by receiving (or not) an invitation to contribute to the community's life. I want to explore how to understand that invitation in relation to church and God. Third, belonging was expressed by various participants in terms of 'being at home'. I want to reflect upon being at home with God, or to use the language of the New Testament to dwell with God.

## **7.2 Consumerist approaches and the search for belonging**

One of the most striking aspects of my participants' journeys towards belonging is that they all used some form of consumerist approach to finding a new church. Helen used web searches when she moved to a new area to identify possible churches to attend. Pippa, knowing where she was going to be living, asked others for recommendations of churches to try. Oliver developed a comprehensive set of criteria that he used to help assess whether a church was one he wished to be part of. While this use of consumer approaches is striking it is not especially surprising. My participants live in a culture that is saturated with consumerism. As David Lyon notes 'Consumerism has become central to the social and cultural life of the technologically advanced societies in the later

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<sup>230</sup> Swinton and Mowat, p.96.

twentieth century'.<sup>231</sup> For Millennials the culture of consumerism and with it the ready use of the wide variety of tools that it offers is second nature. Indeed, it could be said that for those who are so deeply embedded in a consumer culture there is little alternative but to engage with church in a consumerist manner. Yet there is a tension here, which is caused by the great unease about the relationship of the Church to consumer culture.

For many within the Church consumer culture and consumerist approaches are seen as problematic. Vincent Miller, for instance, concludes his analysis of consumer society and its interface with religion saying 'consumer culture is a profound problem for contemporary religious belief and practice. Beyond the excesses of consumerism lie cultural dynamisms that incline people to engage in religious beliefs as if they were consumer commodities'.<sup>232</sup> Miller's problematisation is echoed in much of the theological literature that engages with consumer culture. Clavier, for example, presents consumerism as something that the church must resist. He claims that should that resistance fail 'the Church then becomes merely a niche lifestyle within an overarching global market'.<sup>233</sup> For him the inherent danger of consumerism is that it creates 'a fertile environment in which our desires can be subconsciously manipulated'.<sup>234</sup>

Cavanaugh suggests that consumerism can be seen as a spiritual practice that, like many other spiritual practices, can help to create community and identity. What is problematic for him, however, is that consumerism creates and forms communities around material goods which become detached and abstracted

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<sup>231</sup> Lyon, p.74.

<sup>232</sup> Miller, p.225.

<sup>233</sup> Mark Clavier, *Rescuing the Church from Consumerism*, (London: SPCK, 2013), p.69.

<sup>234</sup> Ibid, p.69.

from the contexts in which they are helpful.<sup>235</sup> He notes that this seems to go against the teachings of Jesus, who told the rich young ruler to ‘go sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, for you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.’ (Matthew 19. 21.) Cavanaugh suggests that ‘detachment from material goods went hand in hand with attachment to Jesus himself [...] and to his community of followers.’<sup>236</sup>

Cavanaugh’s observations are echoed in David Lyon’s critique of consumerism. He notes that within consumer culture ‘meaning is sought as a “redemptive gospel” in consumption and cultural identities are formed through processes of selective consumption.’<sup>237</sup> As such those immersed in a consumer culture find themselves in the position where they risk their identity being formed as much through consumption as their faith in Jesus Christ. For them it is no longer sufficient that they are ‘fearfully and wonderfully made’. (Psalm 139. 14.) They are driven to expressing that through acts of consumption. Lyon’s comments also suggest that it is not what is consumed but rather the process of selective consumption that is the key element in forming identities. The approaches that my participants used to finding churches (web searches, recommendation and lists of criteria) are all part of that system of selective consumption.

There are two significant weaknesses in the reading of consumer culture presented above. First, many of the criticisms of consumerism seem to suggest that cultures are discreet and separate from each other and that it is not possible to have a consumer culture and a Christian culture that overlap. As Kathryn Tanner points out, there is an often held assumption that ‘Christians have a self-sustaining society and culture of their own, which is marked off

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<sup>235</sup> Cavanaugh, p.50.

<sup>236</sup> Ibid, p.51.

<sup>237</sup> Lyon, p.74.



rather sharply from others.<sup>238</sup> However, she goes on to point out that this assumption does not deal with the fact that Christian identity transcends human created divisions. 'There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.' (Galatians 3. 28.)<sup>239</sup> and yet clearly those who are Christian may still be Jew or Greek and have different social and cultural practices. In the same way Christians have an identity the spans both a Christian community and that of a consumer society in which they are situated. Rather than there being a simple distinction between Christian and consumer culture there is instead a complex relationship between the two. As Tanner says 'Christian relations with the wider culture are never simply ones of either accommodation, on the one hand, or opposition and radical critical revision, on the other, but always some mixture'.<sup>240</sup>

The second weakness is that many criticisms of consumerism do not allow for the separation of consumer culture itself from the practices that it requisitions. Instead it supposes that the only way in which the consumerist approaches can be used is for the furtherance of consumer society. Clavier, for instance, explicitly dismisses the distinction made in the Mission Shaped church report between "consumer society" (a term that describes the current shape of Western capitalist societies) and "consumerism" (which can be seen as the

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<sup>238</sup> Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), p.96.

<sup>239</sup> Although Tanner cites Galatians 3. 28. this is a passage that could be interpreted as suggesting that no other cultures exist within God's eyes. The argument for overlapping cultural identities could be more strongly made using John 17. 16. 'They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world.'

<sup>240</sup> Tanner, p.119.

dominant idolatry of those societies)<sup>241</sup>. His view is that each depends on the other and cannot be separated. The authors of the Mission Shaped Church report are not alone, however, in arguing that it is possible for cultural practices to be separated from the society within which they are situated and that the church may use the approaches of consumerism in ways that offer something distinctly different. As Scotland points out 'Church marketers spend a good deal of their energies in studying the culture in order that they may more effectively present the Christian message in a manner that resonates with it.'<sup>242</sup>

If it is possible to simultaneously belong to Christian and consumer culture and to separate consumerist approaches from the consumption of material goods, there remains a question about whether those who are seeking new church communities can use the approaches of a consumer culture in such a way as to assist them to find belonging in the community of God. Augustine's image of the wanderer in a strange land offers a starting point.<sup>243</sup> My research has shown that participants went through what could be considered a journey to find new places of belonging in individual church communities and the wider Church. In Augustine's terms they could be considered 'wanderers' who are on a journey with and to Christ passing through different localities with ever changing phases of life. Seen in this context, consumer culture offers tools that Augustine would suggest can be used to assist on the journey. As he says in *De Doctrina Christiana*, 'if we wish to return to our Father's home, this world must be

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<sup>241</sup> The Archbishop's Council, 'Mission-Shaped Church: Church Planting and Fresh Expressions of Church in a Changing Context', (London: The Archbishop's Council, 2004), p.175. Quoted in Clavier, p.69.

<sup>242</sup> Nigel Scotland, 'Shopping for a Church: Consumerism and the Churches', in *Christ and Consumerism*, ed. by Craig Bartholomew and Thorsten Moritz (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2001), p.150.

<sup>243</sup> Augustine. See above, Chapter 2 Literature review 'Theological perspectives of belonging'.

used, not enjoyed, [...] that is, that by means of what is material and temporary we may lay hold upon that which is spiritual and eternal.<sup>244</sup>

Augustine goes on to warn the traveller of the danger of becoming so enthralled by the tools that they are using on the journey that the purpose of the journey is lost (and the ultimate destination is never reached). As he says:

the beauty of the country through which we pass, and the very pleasure of the motion, charm our hearts, and turning these things which we ought to use into objects of enjoyment, we become unwilling to hasten the end of our journey; and becoming engrossed in a factitious delight, our thoughts are diverted from that home whose delights would make us truly happy.<sup>245</sup>

Our modern traveller faces a similar danger. For them the purpose of using consumerist approaches is to search for new places of belonging in the community of God. Their challenge is how to retain their focus on this ultimate destination.

Gregory of Nyssa suggests this is accomplished in seeking and following God's guidance.

[...] it is always following God that the one desiring to see God sees the one who is longed for, and the contemplation of God's face is the unceasing journey towards God.<sup>246</sup>

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<sup>244</sup> Ibid, p.10. (Book I:4)

<sup>245</sup> Ibid, p.10.

<sup>246</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, quoted John F. Hoffmeyer, 'Desire in Consumer Culture: The Theological Perspective from Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine of Hippo', in *Money as God? The Monetization of the Market and Its Impact on Religion, Politics, Law and*

Augustine makes a similar point, urging the traveller to continually ask God to increase their desire for Him.

The deeper our faith, the stronger our hope, the greater our desire, the larger will be our capacity to receive the gift, which is very great indeed. [...] The more fervent the desire, the more worthy will be its fruits. [...] Desire unceasingly that life of happiness which is nothing if not eternal, and ask it of him alone who is able to give it.<sup>247</sup>

This helps to make sense of some of the experiences of participants as they sought new churches to belong to. When participants wielded consumer approaches in the context of a spiritual framework characterised by prayerful reflection, this seemed to result in the identification of churches that were then attended. When these approaches were used outside of such a frame they led to ultimately overwhelming choice and with it a lack of certainty and security. Pippa for example consciously drew up a complex set of criteria that she applied to any church she attended and over a period of a year did not make a deep connection with any one church. It was only after she relocated that she reassessed this approach and, as she spent time considering what God might be calling her to in terms of vocation, recognised that she needed to find a church where she could actively contribute to the life of the community. This is a significant and profound shift towards using consumer approaches to assist in finding belonging in a spiritual community. It represented an explicit reorientation and change of priorities which is echoed in Gregory of Nyssa's writing. As Sarah Coakly points out

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*Ethics*, ed. by Jurgen von Hagen and Michael Welker (Cambridge: CUP, 2014), pp. 414-39.

<sup>247</sup> Augustine, 'Letter 130: Augustine to Proba', (2009).

[...] at the height of his argument in *de virginitate* Gregory can write that the choice for his reader is whether ultimately to be a "Pleasure-lover" or a "God-lover"—that is, the choice is about what the final telos of one's desire is.<sup>248</sup>

Although the approaches that are being used are recognisably those of consumerism the attitude with which they are used has changed. It reflects Paul's call to 'not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect'. (Romans 12. 2.)

For those who are relocating to a new city and trying to navigate a path through a whole collection of life changes it seems that the tools offered by consumer culture can be of great use on their journey and offer far more than simply ways of building rational choices. When used within a spiritual framework these tools can help direct what Bom identifies as 'the seekers desire'.<sup>249</sup> As we have seen above, however, there needs to be an intentionality about what is being sought and a recognition of where true happiness will be found. Thus, when a web-search is conducted prayerfully seeking a church to attend ceases to be simply a trawl for information. Likewise creating a set of criteria against which to judge any particular church can be interpreted as a tool for seeking God's guidance, especially when we recognise that God may use a whole range of ways to help shape the actions of individuals.<sup>250</sup> Many churches themselves appear to have

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<sup>248</sup> Sarah Coakley, 'Pleasure Principles: Towards a Contemporary Theology of Desire', *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, 33 (2005)  
<[http://www3.hds.harvard.edu/news/bulletin\\_mag/articles/33-2\\_coakley.html](http://www3.hds.harvard.edu/news/bulletin_mag/articles/33-2_coakley.html)>  
[accessed 08/04/2011].

<sup>249</sup> Bom.

<sup>250</sup> Phillip Jensen and Tony Payne, 'How Does God Guide?', *The Briefing*, (1991).

adopted a similar stance, whether consciously or otherwise, using consumerism as a means of furthering the gospel (i.e. by offering information about themselves via a range of readily accessible media). Indeed, it could be argued that churches need to accept and adopt such approaches in order to make it possible for the traveller to use consumerist tools (e.g. web searches) in searching for new places of belonging.

Those who are searching for new places of belonging within church communities are deeply embedded in consumer culture and their approaches to this task are inevitably informed by that culture. Those approaches in and of themselves are not necessarily negative or damaging and should instead be considered merely as tools that can be used to help in the search for belonging. As with all tools, however, consumerist approaches can be handled skilfully to great effect or employed in less careful ways that do not result in such positive outcomes. In the context of the search for church belonging, the tools of consumer culture need to be used wisely and situated within a framework of ongoing spiritual formation since this will enable people to truly discern which church communities God is calling them to.

### **7.3 An invitation to contribute: a Trinitarian perspective**

One of the major problems presented by consumer culture is its tendency to push us into focusing on the individual rather than on community. Consumer culture is all about how individuals interact with the world and how they choose to express themselves through the choices they make. Seen through this lens being part of a community becomes about the choice of the individual, the act of welcome or invitation is a marker of how the individual is received and treated by a church community and the effectiveness of the invitation is seen in how the individual responds. In other words belonging is always an act of the individual in response to other individuals extending welcome to them. Indeed, as I have argued in the context of my research, it is only the individual who can truly determine if they belong since belonging is a condition that is self-defined.

Such an individualised approach, however, is not satisfactory for understanding theologically what is happening within the dynamic of invitation that is pivotal in the move from attending to belonging. The invitation that participants receive is not merely some extended form of welcome or hospitality (for example being invited to attend a meal with a church member). Nor is it an invitation to belonging (none of the participants talked of being formally invited to belong). Instead it is an invitation to contribute by being drawn into an active engagement in the life and relationships of the community. This might more properly be understood as an invitation to participate fully in the life of the church in an active and dynamic way.

The language of participation offers a helpful way of exploring participants experiences from a theological perspective. Theologically participation is encountered in the exploration of the Trinity and the way in which the Trinity relates to Godself and humanity relates to the Trinity. Much of the theological discussion has focused on the nature of the Trinity as community,<sup>251 252 253 254</sup>  
<sup>255 256</sup> but it is the Trinitarian understanding of participation that is of particular

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<sup>251</sup> John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church*, (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1985).

<sup>252</sup> Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998).

<sup>253</sup> British Council of Churches, *The Forgotten Trinity*, (London: British Council of Churches, 1989).

<sup>254</sup> Paul S. Fiddes, *Participating in God : A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity*, (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2000).

<sup>255</sup> Stanley J. Grenz, *The Social God and Relational Self: A Trinitarian Theology of the Imago Dei*, (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001).

interest. Fiddes helpfully sketches the development of the understanding of participation and in so doing presents the problems inherent in each approach.<sup>257</sup> He notes that much of the early development of the doctrine of the Trinity was heavily influenced by non-Christian thought, particularly that of the Neo-Platonist. They held an understanding that the highest reality ('The One') was absolutely transcendent. This meant there was no possibility of participation by any other. From this Arius argued that God is alone, Christ being pre-existent but created out of nothing and therefore having a beginning.<sup>258</sup> Christ was separate from God and therefore participation in God was not possible. For him even Christ was only able to participate in an honorary way 'by grace'.<sup>259</sup>

Against this Athanasius argued the Son does participate in the Father, in his words 'the Son is "from the substance of the Father,"' meaning that 'God is entirely participated'.<sup>260</sup> He also argued that human beings participate in the life of the triune God since 'we partaking of the Son himself are said to partake of God'. However within his conception there needed to be a separation between beings that were created and those uncreated. Thus the nature of participation

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<sup>256</sup> Colin E. Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many: God, Creation and the Culture of Modernity: The Bampton Lectures 1992*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

<sup>257</sup> Paul S. Fiddes, 'Participating in the Trinity', *Perspectives in Religious Studies*, 33 (2006).

<sup>258</sup> Arius, 'Arius's Letter to Eusebius of Nicomedia', in *The Trinitarian Controversy*, ed. by William G. Rusch (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), pp. 29-30.

<sup>259</sup> Fiddes, p.376.

<sup>260</sup> Athanasius, 'Athanasius's Orations against the Arians, Book 1', in *The Trinitarian Controversy*, ed. by William G. Rusch (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), pp. 63-129, p.79.



of created beings is different to the participation of the Son. For Athanasius the Son does not gain his position by participating in the Father, he is rather

[...] participated in by creatures: "For He is himself the Father's Power and Wisdom, and by partaking of him things originate are sanctified in the Spirit; but the Son himself is not the Son by participation, but is the Father's proper Offspring".<sup>261</sup>

This means that we can only participate in the Son through the grace of the Spirit and by this are brought into relationship with the Father.

Within the Eastern Church participation was most strongly addressed by Gregory Palamas who argued that to speak of created beings participating in the relation of the Trinity would mean that finite beings could 'see' God. Thus Palamas says

He who participates in the divine energy [...] becomes in some way light himself; he is united to the light and with the light he beholds with all his faculties all that remains hidden to those who do not have this grace [...] for the pure in heart see God.<sup>262</sup>

This appears contrary to I Timothy 6.15-16. ('He who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords. It is He alone who has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see'). However, for Palamas created beings, by grace, can only share in

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<sup>261</sup> Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius: The Coherence of His Thought*, (London: Routledge, 1998), p.105.

<sup>262</sup> Palamas, quoted H. Cunliffe-Jones, 'Scripture and Tradition in Orthodox Theology', in *Holy Book and Holy Tradition*, ed. by F. F. Bruce and E. G. Rupp (Manchester: Manchester university Press, 1968), pp. 186-209, p.203.

the energies of God and not the essence of God.<sup>263</sup> This, as Fiddes points out, means that there is a limit to participation. There remains an always unknowable part of God.<sup>264</sup>

Aquinas addressed the problem of participation in what is in reality an eschatological manner. He argued that by grace the human intellect could be raised above its nature and thus be made capable of direct vision of the uncreated essence – mortals may somehow approach the unapproachable light. Along with only offering an eschatological possibility (except perhaps in the rare cases of the mystical writers who glimpse God in their earthly life) Aquinas's view also suggests 'participation' means human persons resemble God. It also ultimately calls into question whether there is a need to understand God as Trinity.<sup>265</sup>

Fiddes argues that if we are to 'understand participation in a thoroughly 'trinitarian' way, then we need to conceive of created persons as sharing in the participation of the persons of the Trinity in each other.'<sup>266</sup> He argues that as human beings we are involved

[...] in the interweaving, mutual relations of the Trinity. It is as if God "makes room" within God's own self for created beings to dwell, in the midst of eternal relations of self-giving and other-receiving love between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.<sup>267</sup>

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<sup>263</sup> For a full discussion of this see Kallistos Ware, 'God Hidden and Revealed: The Apophatic Way and the Essence-Energies Distinction', *Eastern Churches Review*, VII (1975).

<sup>264</sup> Fiddes, p.378.

<sup>265</sup> Ibid, p.378f.

<sup>266</sup> Ibid, p.379.

<sup>267</sup> Ibid, p.379.

Volf, however, argues that human beings ‘indwell the life-giving ambience of the Spirit and not the person of the Spirit’.<sup>268</sup> This places limits upon what it means to participate in the life of the Trinity, suggesting that participation is in the life and movement of the Spirit only. But as Fiddes points out this fails to take seriously John 17. 21. ‘as you, Father, are in me, and I am in you, may they also be in us’, a passage that appears to make no distinction in the nature or place of participation.

For Fiddes what is at issue in discussions of participation is the way in which we conceive of relationship. He helpfully points out that in thinking about relationships we are usually drawn to thinking in terms of the persons on either end of the relationship (the Father and the Son for example). This means our focus is drawn to them when we should really conceive of the ‘persons’ as simply the relations. For him, the key is speaking of God as ‘an event of relationships’ (which he derives from Barth ‘with regard to the being of God, the word “event” or “act” is final’), or a ‘movement of relationship’ or ‘three movements of relationship subsisting in one event’.<sup>269</sup> The danger in this approach is that the particularity of the persons of the Trinity is lost, leading ultimately to a God of one substance but not three beings.<sup>270</sup> But Fiddes argues that it is precisely in recognising the relationships that the particular is present.<sup>271</sup> It is only when there is particularity that it is possible for there to be distinct relationship and the particularity can only be truly revealed through the participation in the relationships. Using examples to help explain anything related to the Trinity is always inadequate, but the example of a musical chord

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<sup>268</sup> Volf, p.211.

<sup>269</sup> Fiddes, p.381.

<sup>270</sup> Gunton. p.41ff.

<sup>271</sup> Fiddes, p.83.

may be helpful. The beauty of the chord is made of the inter-relating of the different notes, each one interwoven with the others that are present. The sound is heard as a whole with the relationships between the notes producing the distinct sound, and yet each note is present and retains its particularity. If any of the notes were changed the chord would have a different characteristic. Returning to Fiddes' idea of a 'movement of relationships', we can see that this means that the uncreated does not necessarily relate to the created in the same way as the created to the uncreated, and yet they can be understood to share the same relationship. This enables us to talk of being invited to participate in the life of the Trinity. The invitation is no longer concerned with the substance of the persons of the Trinity, rather it is about the dynamic flow of life in communion with God.

The participatory nature of the Trinity offers a model for the relationships in human community and most importantly for relationships within the Church. It is important to recognise that while it is undoubtedly true that Church may be talked of at a whole range of levels (universal, institutional, communion of congregations, local congregation etc.) within the context of my research I am concerned with how individuals find belonging in local expressions of Church. If we are to follow the model of Trinitarian participation then we can view the church as made up of a movement of relationships. Those relationships are between different people who are unique.

Church must always be understood as a living community. A community that is constantly renewed, reshaped and re-created. Being Church is a dynamic process rather than a static entity. People become truly part of that community not by their proximity to it and to others who are part of it, but by joining in with the dynamics of the act of creation and re-creation. They are drawn into the movement of relationships within it. The invitation to participate in that movement of relationships is all important. Invitation is not about individualism, for invitation involves mutual giving and receiving. Indeed invitation located

within an understanding of the Trinity challenges the notion of individualism as it 'teaches us to think in terms of complex webs of mutuality and participation'.<sup>272</sup> Nor is invitation about social capital suggesting participation in the relationships is only important if they have the potential to be realised into personal value. In the context of being invited into a faith community and ultimately into the life of the Trinity the level of participation is simply about the joy of being involved in the dance.

The conception of church as a movement of relationships opens up the possibility of multilayered intertwined community. It opens the possibility of seeing belonging as being in multi-faceted. Belonging can be to a community that is dispersed across a wide geographic area (for example the networked members of a new monastic community such as the Northumbria community, or as some participants suggested to a church community that has become dispersed by virtue of people moving away). Equally belonging can be to distinct and particular expression of community that is only part of the whole (as in a church made up of multiple congregations). Belonging can overlap and intertwine reflecting the complex movement of the perichoresis of the Trinity. It demonstrates the reality that the church is a communion of community. 'The actions of members of a Christian congregation can inter-penetrate and occupy the same social space simultaneously in a way that the personal subjects can not, even though they can put themselves "in each others place" through empathy and imagination.'<sup>273</sup>

Those arriving at a new church are able to occupy the same space as those who are already there. That space is not simply the physical location but the eternal sense of home suggested by participation in the Trinity and hinted at by

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<sup>272</sup> David S. Cunningham, *These Three Are One: The Practice of Trinitarian Theology*, (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), p.8.

<sup>273</sup> Fiddes, p.72.

Tweed's use of 'cosmic crossings' in his analysis of religious space.<sup>274</sup> When participants talked of attending church they initially referred to a physical location in which a community gather but in their move towards belonging they began to indicate a sense ease with the community who gathered within and beyond that physical place. To illustrate, after relocating for a second time Pippa attended a new church (at that point a physical space as much as a community of faith). In joining in with worship she enters into the worship not only of that group of people gathered in that space at that time, but also the worship of the communion of saints. It is an experience that is both physically located, but also extends beyond the physical. After the service had finished people talked to her and she was quickly invited to participate in the wider life of the community. This took the form of leading a group at girls brigade that met midweek. Within a very short space of time she was connected into the community to the extent that others greeted her in the street.

In Pippa's experience the invitation to participate came very quickly and (not withstanding safeguarding precautions) was not based on the outcome of protracted conversations about her interests and experiences. There is no need to develop understanding of the personal circumstances of the newly arrived, nor for them to grasp the nature of life in an unfamiliar place all that needs to happen is for them to be invited to participate in the life of the community of faith, and ultimately the life of the Trinity.

Two of my participants did not move to being part of local church communities and yet still talked of being part of the body of Christ even though they were separated from a local expression of it. Their reasons for not finding places of belonging differed. For Henry it was all about personal circumstances. He found himself living in a relatively isolated location at the same time as he was exploring issues of personal identity (notably around sexuality) and this led to him experiencing difficulties in finding and accessing a community that he felt

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<sup>274</sup> Tweed, p.150ff.

welcomed by. Oliver's struggle was much more around a deep sense of not finding community that offered him things he was looking for. He did not feel that the communities that he tried to connect to engaged seriously with how faith might be lived out in the face of the poor. As a result of these differing perspectives neither Henry nor Oliver found places of belonging, yet they were clearly still working to make sense of their faith and how it connected with the rest of their lives. They continued to talk of praying and reading the Bible despite being unable to connect with a local church community. In part their experience has much in common with the churchless faith described by Jamieson.<sup>275</sup> Unlike Jamieson's participants, neither Henry nor Oliver had negative experiences that led them to cease to belong to the Church. Instead, their physical relocation fractured that belonging. I (and they) would argue that they had not ceased to be in relationship with God, or to use St. Paul's words to be 'in Christ' despite not finding belonging in a local church community.

At this point it would be easy to side entirely with Fiddes' presentation of a vision of the immanent Trinity and a perspective on participation that suggests it is possible to continue in faith even though that faith may be separated from any local expression of church community. The ultimate conclusion of such a line of argument is that faith does not require church belonging because the participation that we are called to is one that Tweed would describe as a cosmic crossing.<sup>276</sup> It is about participation of the individual in the life of the Trinity. If we turn to the 'economic' expression of the Trinity, however, we are forced to recognize that our greatest invitation to enter into and participate in the life of the Trinity is found in worship. As James Torrance puts it 'worship is the gift of participating through the Spirit in the incarnate Son's communion with the Father.'<sup>277</sup> He goes on to argue that at the heart of the New Testament is not

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<sup>275</sup> Jamieson.

<sup>276</sup> Tweed.

<sup>277</sup> Torrance, p.18.

our relationship with God, but rather the relationship of the Father with the Son and it is by the Spirit that we are drawn to participate in the life of Christ in his 'worship and communion with the Father'.<sup>278</sup> This means that although Henry and Oliver were continuing to participate in the Trinity there is a need for them to eventually find belonging in a church community since the creation of fellowship, the invitation to participation and the life of community was at the heart of Jesus' ministry.<sup>279</sup>

## **7.4 Making ourselves at home: dwelling as the heart of belonging**

Within my research a number of times participants talked about 'being at home'. They were invited to make themselves at home by people they met at church, or they described feeling as if they were 'at home' in a particular church community. Being 'at home' is at the heart of what it means to belong. I have already indicated that home, the place that someone belongs, may not be a singular place. Indeed it may not be a physical place at all. Given the transient nature of post university life, the sense of home and dwelling may need to be conceived of as being located in the wider relationships that they have been invited to participate in rather than the physical geographical space where they live.

In Ephesians 3. 17, which forms part of a prayer for completeness of the reader's experience of God,<sup>280</sup> Paul prays 'that Christ may dwell in your hearts

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<sup>278</sup> Ibid, p.19.

<sup>279</sup> Leonardo Boff, *Ecclesiogenesis: The Base Communities Reinvent the Church*, (London: Collins, 1986), p.46.

<sup>280</sup> Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, (Dallas: Word Books, 1990).



through faith as you are being rooted and grounded in love' – or as the New Living Translation puts it 'that Christ may make His home in your hearts through faith'. Paul's choice of word for dwelling is important. It would be possible to use the word 'paroikeo' which is used to indicate a temporary dwelling (c.f Luke 24. 18, Hebrews 11. 9). However, he uses the word 'katoikeo'. This comes from *kata*, meaning down, and *oikeo*, meaning to reside or dwell in a house. This has much more of a sense of permanent residence, and can be understood to mean dwelling in your real home or 'to take up one's abode'.<sup>281</sup> 'Katoikeo' is a word that Paul only uses in two other places (Colossians 1. 19, 2. 9) where, in both cases he states that 'all the fullness of God's deity dwells in Christ'.<sup>282</sup> This choice of word offers a picture of our relationships, our desires and values as a house where Christ the King comes and makes his home and feels at home. Hoehner's analysis of the syntax of Ephesians 3. 16-17 leads him to suggest the translation 'that he may grant you to be strengthened in the inner person so Christ may dwell in your hearts'.<sup>283</sup> This turns upside down the idea that we are continually seeking the place to be 'at home' suggesting instead that we are invited to have hearts that offer a place for indwelling by Christ. As Hoehner points out, it is important to note that this prayer is not making 'reference to Christ's indwelling at the moment of salvation. Instead, it denotes the

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<sup>281</sup> Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), p.480.

<sup>282</sup> Ibid, p.480.

<sup>283</sup> Ibid, p.481.

contemplated result, namely, that “Christ may be at home in,” that is, at the very center of or deeply rooted in the believers’ lives.’<sup>284 285</sup>

When talking of dwelling Volf notes that it is only the divine person who dwells in human beings and human beings who dwell in the divine person (from Romans 8. 10, 8. 1).<sup>286</sup> It is never human beings, as individuals or community, dwelling in other human beings. This is particularly important when considering church as a place to feel ‘at home’. It is not the sense of community, the relationships created between individuals, or a sense of being made welcome that is important. True dwelling is about being part of the movement of relationships found in communion with the Trinity which is expressed both in the worshipping life of the gathered community and also in its outward movement into God’s world. The indwelling of Christ inevitably shapes and changes the individual, but it also forms and shapes the community as a whole. The community formed is one that follows Christ ‘doing the things that Jesus did and teaching the things that Jesus taught, in the manner that Jesus did and said them’.<sup>287</sup> Clearly a full exploration of the ministry of Jesus is beyond the scope of this work, but one of the key characteristics of His ministry is pertinent to this discussion, namely hospitality.

When we consider hospitality we are often concerned with ideas of invitation and welcome, both of which suggest that there is an identifiable community

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<sup>284</sup> Ibid, p.481.

<sup>285</sup> In Lincoln’s analysis of Ephesians 3.16-17 he argues that ‘Christ functions as equivalent to the role of the Spirit’, and that ‘this reflects the Pauline view in which in believer’s present experience there is no real difference between Christ and the Spirit’ This line of argument offers a further perspective upon Fiddes’ view explored above.

<sup>286</sup> Volf, p.3.

<sup>287</sup> Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God*, (London: Fount, 1998).

which people are invited to and welcomed into and that those who are extending a welcome are fully situated within the community. The invitation that Jesus extends, however, goes beyond this understanding. Two points are worth considering here. First, Jesus had an itinerant ministry and did not form a church community to which people were invited. Instead His invitation to others was to 'come and follow me'. It is an invitation into personal relationship with Jesus, and into the space that is his personal space. It is the sort of invitation that is not unfamiliar in our everyday lives, the invitation to 'come and sit with me' or similar. Second, during His ministry Jesus often appears to invite himself to receive other people's hospitality. For example Jesus invites himself to the house of Zaccheus (Luke 19. 1-10). Here it is not Jesus who acts as host, but He is clearly the one who does the inviting. As such Jesus turns the normal process of hospitality upside down. It is normally only those who have the means of offering a place of hospitality who are able to do so, yet here Jesus takes an initiative not normally seen in polite society. Inviting yourself to a meal (then as now) may be considered rude. On the lips of Jesus, however, this is entirely welcome, for it represents an invitation into relationship and turns Jesus into what Walton terms 'the welcoming guest'.<sup>288</sup> That welcome is developed in a human sense – Jesus sits and eats with Zaccheus who has prepared a meal and invited others to join him. But the welcome is also there in a divine sense. Zaccheus experiences the love of God that offers an acceptance beyond anything he has previously experienced which ultimately transforms his life and the lives of those around him. This inverted pattern of invitation can also be seen in Luke 7. 36-50 where Jesus is the guest of a Pharisee. Here He turns the idea of hospitality and welcome upside down in his interaction with the woman who anoints his feet with perfume and the Pharisees who were formally acting as host. His sharp critique of the lack of hospitality extended to him by

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<sup>288</sup> Martin Walton, 'The Welcoming Guest: Practices of Mutual Hospitality in Chaplaincy', in *Encounter in Pastoral Care and Spiritual Healing. Towards an Integrative and Intercultural Approach*, ed. by Louw D., Ito T., and Elsdörfer U. (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2012), pp. 220-35.

the Pharisees is in sharp contrast to the welcome and inclusion that he gives to the woman.

When seen in the life of the church this form of self-invitation and inverted welcome may be considered an outworking of Christ's dwelling. Paul's prayer for the Christian community to be rooted in love (Ephesians 3. 17 'Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love') suggests that if we are to love as Christ loves we need to have our security, our identity, and our sustenance deeply rooted in God's love for us. If this is the case, when someone is disconnected from a community that had previously felt like 'home' there is likely to be a deep desire to discover a new community, since this offers them the opportunity and resources to be rooted and grounded in love. Here, it is possible for the outsider to become the welcoming guest since their self-invitation is not impudent or self-serving, but instead flows from the deep relationships of the Trinity. Of course, this act of apparent self-invitation takes a certain confidence and may not be something that is easy for those who are on the outside to offer (although it should be anticipated and welcomed). Instead, others who are already situated in a community may be far better placed to offer that invitation. But however (and by whoever) it is offered, in the context of a community rooted and grounded in love invitation and welcome represents an invitation to dwell with God and with the community of the people of God. It is truly an invitation to belong.

## 8 Conclusion

### 8.1 Research summary and reflection

Throughout my ministry as a university chaplain I have met many young people who were actively involved in church communities while they were students but struggled to find new church communities to belong to in the years following university. Through informal discussion with colleagues and undertaking some initial reading I identified that there was a significant gap in understanding this important transition point. I saw this as a significant issue. As a pastor I was concerned for the spiritual journey of such individuals. As a minister in the church I was concerned by the lost potential of a group of able, talented and previously committed people. This thesis emerged from my attempts to answer my own ministerial question, which became my key research question, namely, “How do recent graduates find belonging in new church communities?”

In the preceding chapters I offered a survey of existing literature related to that question. From there I developed a research method appropriate to an empirical study of that question. The analysis of the data that I generated enabled me to develop a model that illustrates the process by which recent graduates searched for and moved towards belonging in new church communities.

The creation of the model was possible because there was commonality between all the participants. Their journeys were far from identical and they each had very different experiences of searching for new church communities, but they did all engage in a broadly similar process. That process was rarely a linear one. As shown in their biographies of belonging in Chapter 5 participants spent different lengths of time in each stage and some repeated stages as they moved between different churches. Some did not progress all the way through the process and did not find places to belong.

All the participants used some form of consumer approach to finding a new church community. At one level this seems unsurprising given the all-pervasive nature of consumer culture. However, the use of consumer approaches to finding churches had not been previously identified through empirical research. For those who found their ways to new churches there was a significant difference between attending and belonging. The majority of research about church membership focuses upon attendance figures and does not recognise this subtle but very significant difference. The difference between attending and belonging is difficult for those who are church leaders to identify. It is the individual who is the one who is truly able to say that they belong. For those who said that they belonged to a church the most significant commonality was that they had all received and had accepted an invitation to contribute to the life of the church. Their participation in the community was key to them forming a sense of belonging.

## **8.2 Suggestions for transforming practice**

All of my research participants had been actively involved in the life of a church while they were students. They were people who were motivated to find new church communities to belong to and yet some did not. I would like to suggest that there are a number of things that might aid the transition for those in a similar position and help them to find new places of belonging. These suggestions are addressed to three different groups, chaplains (and others) who work with students, churches (and the ministers who lead them) that receive new graduates and, finally, students who are preparing to make the journey beyond the university campus.

### **8.2.1 Suggestions for University Chaplains**

My research has shown that young people who were making the transition to life beyond university valued receiving encouragement and support from

different church communities as they made that transition. My research also suggests that those who received such support found it easier to identify new places of belonging. Although for chaplains there is a sense that pastoral care ends as students graduate from university there is a valuable opportunity for contact with students who have been actively involved in the life of the chaplaincy (or student church) to be maintained. As well as offering encouragement and support through the difficult transition time such contact may directly contribute to helping young people find new places of belonging.

During my research I found that participants used recommendations from and contacts with people they trusted as a way of identifying possible churches to attend. Chaplains are often in such a position of trust. They also have access to a range of networks and connections. These include connections to other chaplains across the country, to clergy colleagues and to former students. As such there is a significant opportunity for chaplains to help students make connections in new locations as part of their preparation to move.

My research identified that those who made use of consumer approaches within a spiritual framework more readily found new church communities to belong to. Their search for new places of belonging was not purely focused on satisfying their own desires but involved listening for the guiding of the Holy Spirit. Chaplains are well placed to help students develop a strong understanding of how to seek God's guidance which will stand them in good stead not only for finding new church communities and places of belonging but also as part of their ongoing growth as Christian disciples.

Within my research I saw that those who contributed to the life of church communities very quickly came to consider themselves as belonging to those communities. In preparation for making such a contribution beyond university life chaplains could encourage students to develop their participation within the life of chaplaincy and the church communities they are part of during university. As they prepare to move on from university chaplains could also encourage students to seek opportunities to contribute to the life of new communities they

come into contact with. Through these activities chaplains would also be able to help students to develop a greater understanding of the importance of participation not only within church communities but also in the life of the Trinity.

### **8.2.2 Suggestions for churches**

My research has demonstrated the prevalence of consumer approaches to finding new church communities amongst those who have recently left university. In order to enable them to make use of these approaches, churches need to take the idea of the religious marketplace seriously. This is not to say that churches should think of themselves as competing with others in the market but rather that they need to ensure that information about the church is both accurate and readily available. Those who were looking for churches were often unfamiliar with a new town. They wanted to be able to find up-to-date information about the location of a church, the times of services and ideally some indication as to what the style of these might be so that they could make an initial assessment of whether they were likely to find belonging in that church community. Some of my participants were also driven by a desire to identify a particular 'brand' as they looked for a new church to attend. Such branding included the church's denomination, doctrinal position and style of worship. Churches have an opportunity to use such things as denomination or network affiliations as markers which could help people navigate through a complex market. Again, ensuring that this information is easily visible is important for helping people identify those churches that they may want to attend and where they are most likely to feel at home.

During my research I found that all of my participants had complex lifestyles which meant that church attendance often competed with many other demands on their time. What was striking was that irregular attendance did not necessarily mean that they lacked commitment, were unable to contribute or did not feel that they belonged to their church communities. Churches need to recognise the challenging lifestyle of those who have recently left university and that it may not be possible to gauge whether someone is committed to a particular church community based on how often they attend Sunday worship.



Offering opportunities to connect with the church community at other times (e.g. midweek activities) may be a valuable way of helping newcomers establish themselves in the community and build a sense of belonging.

My research showed that those who felt that they belonged to church communities actively contributed to shaping the life of that community and wanted to be invited to participate in the life of the church. Importantly, some were offered such an invitation as soon as they arrived at a new church and none seemed to feel that the invitation had been offered too soon. The invitation to contribute did need to be genuine, however, and ideally take into account their skills and gifts. This suggests that churches need to be prepared to invite newcomers to contribute before they have been judged as being regular attenders and that they need to invest time and energy in discovering the gifts and skills of those newcomers. Some of my participants did not wait for an invitation to contribute but instead took the role of the welcoming guest by actively seeking an opportunity to contribute. It takes a certain confidence to issue such a self-invitation, and while some graduates have such entrepreneurial confidence in abundance most do not. This suggests that churches also need to be prepared to take seriously and respond positively to any offers made by newcomers. For many churches both of these suggestions will seem challenging. There is often uncertainty as to whether a newcomer will 'stick' with a church or whether they are the right sort of person to be involved in a particular area of church life. It is important to recognise, however, that the invitation they are offering is not just to participate in the life of the church community, but to join the church universal in participating in the life of the Trinity.

### **8.2.3 Suggestions for those about to leave university**

In my research I identified that all of my participants developed some form of planned approach to finding a new church, which included developing lists of criteria and performing web searches. Such planning seemed helpful to them and enabled them to quickly begin searching for new church communities as they moved to their new locations. Students who are preparing to move to a

new location will typically take a relatively planned approach to search for all sorts of important things such as housing, housemates, transport links and so on. For those wanting to find new church communities in their new location taking a planned approach to searching for information about potential church communities should also feature in those preparations.

For some participants receiving recommendations and invitations to attend churches made a significant contribution to them finding a new church to belong to. This suggests that the use of social capital and social networks is an important aspect of helping recent graduates to identify churches to connect with in a new town. As students leave university they should consider making use of their networks and pre-existing relationships to help them find connections with others who are already established in their new location and can provide advice, guidance and introductions to new church communities.

Within my research it was clear that participants used selection criteria to help them consider whether a church was one that they might want to belong to. Their creation of a shopping list of criteria did not appear to be a good or bad thing in and of itself. Instead, the context within which the list was created and used appeared to be more significant in terms of their search for new places of belonging. Those who conducted their search within a clear spiritual framework were more open to the possibility of being part of a community rather than being focused on finding the perfect church. This suggests that those preparing to leave university should consider searching for a church as part of their journey of discipleship and should conduct their search with a deliberate sense of seeking God's guidance.

My research showed that the key to finding belonging in a new church community was an invitation to contribute to the life of that church. Those who accepted such invitations found belonging. Those about to leave university should recognise that some churches may be more reticent in offering invitations than others but that this does not necessarily preclude their contribution. Instead, the concept of the welcoming guest, modelled by Jesus,

suggests that it is entirely appropriate for newcomers to actively seek opportunities to get involved and offer contributions to a new church community. In order to do this, those about to leave university need to develop an awareness of the gifts and ability that they may be able to offer to a church community and be open to identifying opportunities for them to offer those gifts.

### **8. 3 Concluding remarks**

Church belonging is a complex phenomenon and through this research I have shown that the journey towards belonging in new church communities is an equally complex process. Whilst statistical evidence shows a clear decline in church attendance among millennials, my research suggests that this group are not necessarily making active decisions to leave the church but are instead likely to be struggling to find and journey towards belonging in new church communities.

The complexity of the journey towards belonging means that at each stage of the journey there are risks for the traveller. As they start to discern which churches to attend they may struggle due to a lack of information, recommendations or invitations to potential church communities. They may also find themselves facing the consumer temptation of seeking the perfect fit by developing overly complex or restrictive selection criteria. Once the traveller has found a church to attend they may find that the church does not actively invite them to contribute to the life of the community, restricting their ability to participate in the life of the Trinity and move towards belonging.

My research aimed to develop a better understanding of how recent graduates journey towards belonging in new church communities. Armed with this understanding and a clearer sense of the different stages in that complex journey, it is my hope that I and my colleagues in chaplaincy and the wider church will be able to better support people as they journey towards belonging

in new church communities so that they can continue on their journeys within and towards the Kingdom of God.

## **Appendix 1**

### **Interview topic guide for initial interviews**

#### **Church belonging**

1. Which church(es) did you belong to while at university?
2. What did you enjoy about being part of there?
3. What were you involved in? (e.g. attending services, student group, home group, music team etc.)
4. How did you end up at that church?
5. What about the place meant you kept going back?
6. Did/do you go to any other churches?
7. How long for?
8. Why didn't you stay?
9. Are you involved in any Christian community at University? (e.g. CU/SCM)
10. When you're away from [university city] do you go to any other churches?
11. Do you/they maintain contact the rest of the year?
12. Were you involved in other Christian communities or activities beyond your Uni. church? (e.g. CU, home church, Soul Survivor, Taize)

#### **Motivations**

- 1) Why do you think others go to your church?
- 2) Why do you go to church?
- 3) What difference does going to church make to your life?
- 4) Who do you go to find support/encouragement/challenge/inspiration in faith?

#### **Faith impact on life**

- 1) On a day-to-day basis what difference does being a Christian make to your life?
- 2) Do you give to any church? (e.g. money, volunteering)

**Wider belonging**

- 1) Do you belong to any non-church groups? (e.g. sport, music, art)

## **Appendix 2**

### **Mid-point interview topic guide**

The following questions were used as a topic guide for the interviews. The questions were not used in a strict format, rather they formed the basis for a broad conversation around the subject areas allowing the participants to discuss issues that they felt were important to them.

- Which churches have you attended over since you left university?
- Which of these would you say you belonged to?
- If you feel you belong to a church (or more than one) what have you got involved in at that church?
- How would you describe your relationship to the churches you attended but don't feel you belong to?
- Have you kept in touch with people from the church you were part of while you were at university?
- Has that church actively kept in touch with you in any way?
- How has your personal faith changed over the past few months? (e.g. changes in prayer/Bible reading patterns; questioning faith because of things encountered in work/personal life; new perspective from being part of a new church)

## Appendix 3

### Final interview topic guide

- Have you been going to church since we last met?
  - Where?
  - How frequently?
  - Anywhere else?
  - [If these are new places] How did you start going there?
  - What are you involved in there (beyond just attending services)?
- Which of these churches would you say you belonged to?
  - Is feeling you belong important to you?
  - What makes you feel you belong?
  - How do you know when you belong somewhere?
- Who do you relate most closely to at your church?
  - Are they like you /different to you?
  - Do you find it easy or difficult to relate to people at your church?
  - What kind of difficulties do you find (e.g. generational, theological, social)?
- Previous churches
  - Have you kept in touch with people from the church you were part of while you were at university?
  - Has that church actively kept in touch with you in any way?
- How has your personal faith changed over the past few months?
  - Has your prayer/Bible reading pattern changed?



- Have things you've encountered in work/personal life made you question faith?
- Has a new church given you exciting new perspectives?

## Appendix 4

### Codes, themes and categories

The table below shows the initial codes which were developed and applied to the dataset, and describes the type of material which was coded.

Code	Definition
Consumer behaviour	Talk connected to consumer approaches (e.g. criteria, church as product)
Churches tried	Churches visited (not necessarily joined)
Geography	Location of the church
Size	Size of church congregation
Time of service	Talk related to time as preference
Doctrine	Talk related to church teaching
Personal identity	Talk related to creating or developing their personal identity (e.g. values, motivations)
Style of preaching	Talk related to preaching (e.g. content, theology, style)
Style of worship	Talk related to style of service (e.g. music, liturgy, formality)
Spirituality	Talk related to personal spiritual growth & development
Prayer for guidance	Talk related to praying around decisions of church to attend

<b>Code</b>	<b>Definition</b>
Family	Talk related to family & church
Friendship	Talk related to friends & church
Social Capital	Talk about social connections either bridging or bonding
Congregation make-up	Who is part of the congregation (e.g. age, social class, ethnicity)
Welcome	Talk of how participants were made to feel welcome
Changed dynamic	Differences from previous belonging to new (those returning to church they had previously attended)
Expectations of behaviour	Implicit or explicit expectations of behaviour by church members
Work Pressure	Talk related to work and attendance at church
Lifestyle	Talk about lifestyle factors and choice to belong (or not)
Not to belong	Talk about reasons to not return to a church tried
Time to belonging	How long it takes before a participant says they belong
Discipleship	Talk related to growing in faith
Other belonging	Other activities/groups that participants belong to (e.g. Sports club, music groups)
Places of belonging	Churches that a participant feels they belong to
Mission	Talk related to church as a place to equip people for mission

<b>Code</b>	<b>Definition</b>
Activities involved in	Church based activities participants take part in
Community	Talk related to community aspects of belonging

The following table shows the final themes and categories and their relationship to the initial codes

<b>Category</b>	<b>Theme</b>	<b>Codes</b>
Discerning	Market place	Consumer behaviour Churches tried
	Selection criteria	Geography Size Time of service Doctrine Personal identity Style of preaching Style of worship Congregation make-up
	Brand loyalty	Style of preaching Style of worship
	Discernment	Spirituality Prayer for guidance
	Connections and relationships	Family Friendship Social Capital
	Recommendation	Family Friendship

<b>Category</b>	<b>Theme</b>	<b>Codes</b>
Attending	Welcome	Welcome Changed dynamic Expectations of behaviour
	Time & Space to attend	Work Pressure Lifestyle Not to belong Time to belonging
Belonging	Wanting to be needed	Discipleship
	Getting involved	Other belonging Places of belonging Mission Activities involved in
	Community	Community

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